

### The strategic partnership between Georgia and the United States: vision wanted

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SWP Research Paper

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*Franziska Smolnik*

# The Strategic Partnership between Georgia and the United States: Vision Wanted



Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik  
German Institute for  
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- Georgia's political leadership has been pursuing close ties to the United States and a geopolitical positioning in "the West" at least since the presidency of Mikheil Saakashvili. A formal Strategic Partnership has structured the relationship since 2009.
- Donald Trump's "America First" policy and the transition to a supposedly less pro-American political leadership in Georgia have raised questions over the status of the bilateral relationship.
- Georgian-US ties remain close and have intensified in recent years. They are still essential to Tbilisi. But the two sides do not always associate the same expectations, functions and priorities with the Strategic Partnership.
- Washington prioritises democracy and rule of law, and corresponding reforms in Georgia. Tbilisi concentrates on security and defence and increasingly also economic and trade cooperation.
- The biggest obstacle to a further deepening of the relationship, however, is Washington's lack of a strategic vision for Georgia and the region.
- This strategic void places limits on Tbilisi's efforts to establish its own imagined geography in Washington. Without a clear US strategy the Strategic Partnership perpetuates Georgia's liminality, its suspension between "east" and "west". In this respect it resembles Georgia's Association Agreement with the European Union.

**SWP Research Paper**

*Franziska Smolnik*

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## **The Strategic Partnership between Georgia and the United States: Vision Wanted**

When Donald Trump was elected 45th President of the United States in 2016 under the slogan “America First”, many countries found themselves wondering about their future relations with the world’s leading power. In the post-Soviet space the question was most pressing for Georgia. Tbilisi had pursued close ties with the United States at least since Mikheil Saakashvili assumed the presidency in 2004, seeking to counterbalance Georgia’s historical and geographical liminality – its intermediacy between “east” and “west” – with a strategic policy. While George W. Bush had lauded Georgia as a “beacon of liberty” and Tbilisi named the main road to its airport after him, the Obama administration had introduced a note of sobriety. In 2016, the year of Trump’s election, elections were also held in Georgia. The Georgian Dream coalition, which had defeated Mikheil Saakashvili’s United National Movement in 2012, remained the strongest political force and began its second term. Critics of Georgian Dream complained that known pro-Americans with good contacts in Washington had successively left the governing coalition. They interpreted this as a sign that Georgian Dream was turning away from its predecessor’s transatlantic course or pursuing it less consistently. Despite Washington’s supposed disengagement from the region under Donald Trump and the impression that there are fewer prominent and outspoken Americanophiles in Georgian Dream, relations between Tbilisi and Washington have deepened in recent years. This applies above all to security and defence policy, as exemplified by the long-awaited sale of Javelin anti-tank missiles to Georgia.

These sometimes contradictory elements and diverging perceptions give good reason to take a closer look at how the Georgian-American relationship has developed, especially during the period of the Trump administration and Georgian Dream’s second term. The present analysis centres on the Strategic Partnership, which has formed the backbone of the relationship since 2009. How has it taken shape? What functions does each side attribute to it? Where do the two partners concur, and where do they differ?



What positions does each take towards the other, for example with respect to shared goals and mutual expectations?

Cooperation with the (member states of the) European Union and with the United States form the principal axes of Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration course. The study illuminates the extent to which Georgia's cooperation with the United States complements, reinforces and potentially also deviates from the policy of the European Union, which is connected to Georgia by an Association Agreement and a Free Trade Agreement. The European Union, NATO and the United States — which from a Georgian perspective and in institutional-geographic terms constitute an imagined "West" — have been points of reference of Georgian politics at the latest since the mid-2000s. At the same time, the goal of joining the EU and NATO is still not within reach. The present analysis of the American-Georgian Strategic Partnership reveals the complexity of the geopolitical transition sought by Tbilisi, to anchor Georgia in "the West". It shows how the Strategic Partnership essentially reproduces Georgia's geopolitical "in-betweenness". These observations are also relevant to relations between the EU and Georgia.

The American-Georgian Strategic Partnership has four core areas: (a) democracy and governance, (b) defence and security, (c) economic, trade and energy cooperation, and (d) people-to-people and cultural exchanges. As such it covers a broad spectrum of topics and fields of cooperation. Democracy and governance, defence and security — and from the Georgian perspective increasingly also economic, trade and energy cooperation — are the central aspects of mutual cooperation (intentions).

Both sides attempt to advance their own interests in the Strategic Partnership. Democratic and rule of law reforms were already one of Washington's priorities in 2009, when this cooperation format was launched. Shared values form an integral component of the bilateral understanding. But from the Georgian perspective — as already under Saakashvili — this prioritisation risks creating a conflict between domestic and external role concepts, for example if such reforms potentially undermine established power structures. Not least for that reason, the Georgian leadership appears to emphasise security and defence cooperation, and prospectively economic and trade cooperation. Cooperation on security and defence has been adjusted and expanded, and now explicitly supports Georgian territorial defence. In terms of eco-

nomic and trade cooperation, Tbilisi is seeking to anchor the idea of Georgia as a trade and logistics hub between the EU and China. The central challenge for Georgia, however, is that Washington possesses no strategic vision for the country or the region. That makes it hard for Georgia to justify its own strategic relevance or its belonging to the "West", to establish this "imagined geography" in Washington, and thus to deepen and develop the Strategic Partnership in its own directions. But this has been the case since the end of the Bush administration and cannot be attributed solely to President Trump.

# Introduction

The starting point of the study is the complex and sometimes contradictory perspectives on the state of the Georgian-American relationship since the beginning of the Trump presidency and under the government of the Georgian Dream. The study examines the relationship through the lens of the Strategic Partnership between Georgia and the United States, which has structured mutual relations since it was established in 2009.

The analysis sets out to answer the following questions: What functions do Tbilisi and Washington attribute to the Strategic Partnership? What rights, obligations and expectations do they associate with the mutual relationship? How does each position itself vis-à-vis the other, how are they themselves positioned? And: how strategic is the Strategic Partnership?<sup>1</sup>

The study analyses the construction of the Strategic Partnership, the way it is elaborated by the participating actors. It draws on official documents from both sides as well as joint statements on the Strategic Partnership. Insights from twenty-five semi-structured interviews conducted in Washington and Tbilisi with serving and former diplomats, government officials, experts and other actors also flow into the analysis.<sup>2</sup>

1 Luis Fernando Blanco, “The Functions of ‘Strategic Partnership’ in European Union Foreign Policy Discourse”, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 29, no. 1 (2016): 36 – 54 (40). See also the text box “Strategic Partnership – an Undefined Concept” on p. 15 in this publication.

2 Publications of the two governments, in particular their foreign and defence ministries, and the respective parliaments were systematically reviewed. The relevant primary documents were compiled in a database and analysed using MaxQDA. I am especially grateful to Belinda Nüssel for her assistance with this aspect of the research. As well as primary documents and interviews, secondary literature was also analysed.

# A Brief History of Georgian-American Relations

Georgia and the United States can now look back at almost three decades of shared relations. Although a significant development process is observed over the course of that period and the political actors have changed on both sides, echoes of earlier episodes are found throughout the present relationship, whether through continuity, evolution or explicit distancing. A review can therefore tell us a great deal about the state of the relationship today.

## The Beginnings

Under President Eduard Shevardnadze, who ruled from 1992 to 2003,<sup>3</sup> Georgia was already turning increasingly to the West and especially the United States. Since the demise of the Soviet Union, and in particular since the centralisation of Russian foreign policy under President Vladimir Putin, Moscow has regarded the South Caucasus as significant for the stability of its North Caucasus republics and of Russia as a whole. This is associated with claims to a sphere of influence in the region. Tbilisi sought to escape that influence, and benefitted from Washington's efforts to install its own liberal values in the post-Soviet states. That in turn drew criticism from Moscow, which felt Washington was encroaching into its own neighbourhood where it asserts overriding interests. That basic constellation is a defining factor in the region's geopolitical configuration to this day.<sup>4</sup>

3 Shevardnadze was Chairman of the Parliament from 1992 to 1995, from 1995 President of Georgia.

4 Kornely Kakachia et al., "Change and Continuity in the Foreign Policies of Small States: Elite Perceptions and Georgia's Foreign Policy towards Russia", *Europe-Asia Studies* 70, no. 5 (2018): 814–31; Sergey M. Markedonov and Maxim A. Suchkov, "Russia and the United States in the Caucasus: Cooperation and Competition", *Caucasus Survey* 8, no. 2 (2020): 179–95; Jason Bruder, "The US and the New Eastern Europe (Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and

The United States began supplying humanitarian and financial aid to Georgia in the course of the 1990s. Washington's engagement in the region was also driven by its interest in developing the Caspian hydrocarbon reserves and supplying oil and gas to Europe on an east-west axis passing through Georgia but avoiding Russia. By the end of the 1990s Washington's financial aid was increasingly channelled towards democratisation – and made conditional on the implementation of democratic reforms. President Shevardnadze's announcement in 2002 that Georgia was seeking full membership of NATO, was a clear signal of the country's turn to the West. The beginnings of bilateral security cooperation also lie in the Shevardnadze era, with the US military training Georgian forces between 2002 and 2004 under the Georgia Train and Equip Program (GTEP), and Georgia's participation from 2003 in Operation Iraqi Freedom.<sup>5</sup>

## Personalisation and Symbolism under Saakashvili and Bush

By the end of the 1990s, Washington's financial support was increasingly flowing to civil society institutions and actors,<sup>6</sup> many of whom later became representatives of the new Georgian political elite that rose to power through the so-called Rose Revolution

Azerbaijan) since 1991", in *Managing Security Threats along the EU's Eastern Flanks*, ed. Rick Fawn (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 69–97; Gerard Toal, *Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). See also the text box "Georgia and NATO: Developments through 2008" on p. 11 in this publication.

5 The US-led Georgia Sustainment and Stability Operations Program was launched in 2005 to enhance the capability of Georgian forces participating in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

6 Archil Gegeshidze, *Contemporary Georgian-American Relations: Key Features of the Evolution*, Expert Opinion 74 (Tbilisi: Rondeli Foundation, 2017), 7.

of 2003. The government of the reformer and moderniser Mikheil Saakashvili (2004–2012) propagated an unequivocally pro-Western course with the declared goal of integrating Georgia into the Euro-Atlantic structures. In the process, in fact, it drew on many elements that can be traced back to the Shevardnadze era.<sup>7</sup> Until the end of the 1990s the intensification of relations with Western actors, first and foremost the United States, tended to be discreet, and initially complemented parallel relations with Russia. The Saakashvili government's overt pro-Western orientation, by contrast, was soon embedded in a pronounced discourse of distancing from Russia.<sup>8</sup>

**Saakashvili presented Georgia to  
“the West” as a trailblazer for  
democracy and “Western” values  
in the post-Soviet space.**

Saakashvili presented Georgia to “the West” as a trailblazer for democracy and “Western” values in the post-Soviet space. This political framing or narrative fell on open ears in Washington under George W. Bush, where the “Freedom Agenda” formed a central trope of US foreign policy and support for democratic movements and democratisation processes was regarded as a means of combatting extremism and terrorism. Georgia was often held up as a paragon.<sup>9</sup> Washington's support in the scope of the GTEP was already also discursively embedded in America's “fight against global terror”.<sup>10</sup> In 2004 Georgian forces

joined the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan.

Another indication of the constructed synergies and complementarities of Georgian and American foreign policy in that period is the Bush administration's assertion that it contributed to the Rose Revolution by supporting Georgian civil society organisations.<sup>11</sup> In May 2005, eighteen months after the political transition, George W. Bush, on his first state visit, spoke of Georgia as a “beacon of liberty” and emphasised America's friendship.<sup>12</sup> Just a few months earlier the US Senators John McCain and Hillary Clinton had nominated President Mikheil Saakashvili and his Ukrainian counterpart Viktor Yushchenko for the Nobel Peace Prize. This type of symbolism is especially characteristic of this phase of Georgian-American relations.<sup>13</sup>

Such displays of friendship were rooted not least in an intense personalisation of the relationship. Like many of his cohort, Saakashvili had studied in the United States, which is presumably where he acquired some of the neoliberal ideas for his political programme. The Georgians succeeded in maintaining their close relationship with Washington and turning it to their own ends.<sup>14</sup> Successful lobbying, for example, enabled Saakashvili's government to increase the volume of financial support from the United States and expand its reach. The aid was also channelled in ways that placed it at the direct disposal of the government to use for its modernisation project. In a sense it could be said that the money followed the civil society actors who had risen to positions of political leadership in the course of the Rose Revolution. The focus of Washington's policy towards Georgia shifted correspondingly, from broader pursuit of democra-

<sup>7</sup> Toal, *Near Abroad* (see note 4), 111.

<sup>8</sup> David Matsaberidze, “The Foreign Policy and Security Nexus in Georgia”, in *Harnessing Regional Stability in the South Caucasus: The Role and Prospects of Defence Institution Building in the Current Strategic Context*, ed. Frederic Labarre and George Niculescu, Study Group Information 10/2017 (Vienna, August 2017), 49–64 (49).

<sup>9</sup> Toal, *Near Abroad* (see note 4), 107–25; Niklas Nilsson, “Role Conceptions, Crises, and Georgia's Foreign Policy”, *Cooperation and Conflict* 54, no. 4 (2019): 445–65 (452); Thomas Carothers, *U.S. Democracy Promotion during and after Bush* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2007); Eugene Rumer et al., *U.S. Policy toward the South Caucasus: Take Three* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 2017), 16–18.

<sup>10</sup> Here, however, Georgia was itself the addressee, with a programme focussing on counter-terrorism training designed to bolster its stability. Linda D. Kozaryn, “U.S. Considers Train and Equip Program for Georgia”, *American Forces Press Service* (online), 27 February 2002,

<https://archive.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=43902> (accessed 12 August 2020).

<sup>11</sup> *Fact Sheet: President Bush's Freedom Agenda Helped Protect the American People*, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/freedomagenda/> (accessed 12 August 2020).

<sup>12</sup> Nick Paton Walsh, “Bush Toasts Georgia as a ‘Beacon of Liberty’”, *Guardian* (online), 11 May 2005, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/may/11/georgia.usa> (accessed 12 August 2020).

<sup>13</sup> On symbolic politics see for example Jan Christoph Suntrup, “The Symbolic Politics of the State of Exception: Images and Performances”, *Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft* 28, no. 4 (2018): 565–80.

<sup>14</sup> Toal, *Near Abroad* (see note 4), 119–121.

## Georgia and NATO: Developments through 2008

Georgian-American relations are closely bound up with Georgia's relationship with NATO, where Washington's favourable attitude is reflected. The relationship between NATO and Georgia deepened steadily from the early 1990s.<sup>a</sup> Georgia joined the North Atlantic Cooperation Council in 1992<sup>b</sup> and the Partnership for Peace two years later. By 1999 Georgian forces were participating in NATO's Kosovo Force (KFOR). At the 2002 Prague NATO summit Georgia stated its wish to join NATO, and an Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) was agreed in 2004. In 2006 NATO began an Intensified Dialogue (ID) with Georgia about its accession wish, explicitly without preempting a decision.

The events of August 2008 were preceded by the NATO summit in Bucharest in April, where differences among NATO members over the question of Georgian accession became obvious. From Georgia's perspective, in light of its own threat perceptions, joining NATO was the centrepiece of its efforts to integrate into Euro-Atlantic structures. NATO membership in particular promised strategic inclusion in the "Western community", an effective guarantee against possible Russian aggression and in general terms a shield for its own independence and stability. Despite NATO's "open door" policy and a certain degree of support within the organisation, the member states were never in full agreement on whether the accession wish could be fulfilled (nor are they today). The sceptics cite various arguments: As well as the factor of Russia, which would regard accession as crossing a red line with respect to its own national security, the unresolved conflicts over the secessionist regions or de facto states of Abkhazia and South Ossetia need to be factored in, along with the geographical difficulties of actually defending Georgia in case of need – and associated doubts over the strategic added value for the alliance.<sup>c</sup>

Washington was one of Tbilisi's supporters at the Bucharest NATO summit in 2008, and argued for approval for Membership Action Plans (MAPs) for Georgia and Ukraine. An MAP is generally regarded as the precursor to membership. Washington also attempted to persuade NATO to adopt this position. Others like

France and Germany were much more cautious with respect to an MAP, still more so concerning the possibility of actual membership.<sup>d</sup> Although the NATO members did agree in Bucharest to offer Georgia and Ukraine a prospect of membership, they avoided naming any timetable. Nor was Tbilisi granted a Membership Action Plan. The August War just a few months later reinforced the scepticism of the doubters, who interpreted the conflict as a message to NATO, Georgia and other potential accession candidates that Russia would not sit back and watch enlargement happen.<sup>e</sup> And it made it even more complicated to reach agreement among the NATO states about the possibility of an MAP or accession for Georgia. Instead they agreed in September 2008 to deepen cooperation by means of a NATO-Georgia Commission.<sup>f</sup> In December 2008 the Individual Partnership Action Plan was superseded by an Annual National Programme.

- a Georgia's relations with NATO can only be summarised superficially here. The scope of the study precludes a detailed description. The same applies to the NATO-Georgia-relationship after 2008.
- b From 1997 the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council.
- c S. Neil MacFarlane, *Two Years of the Dream: Georgian Foreign Policy during the Transition*, Russia and Eurasia Programme (London: Chatham House, 2015), 2; Sebastian Mayer, "The EU and NATO in Georgia: Complementary and Overlapping Security Strategies in a Precarious Environment", *European Security* 26, no. 3 (2017): 435–53 (438); Tracey German, "NATO and the Enlargement Debate: Enhancing Euro-Atlantic Security or Inciting Confrontation?" *International Affairs* 93, no. 2 (2017): 291–308.
- d Toal, *Near Abroad* (see note 4), 94f.; Mayer, "The EU and NATO in Georgia" (see note c), 438.
- e German, "NATO and the Enlargement Debate" (see note c), 299f.
- f Mayer, "The EU and NATO in Georgia" (see note c), 438f.

tisation to direct support for Saakashvili's government.<sup>15</sup>

The highly personalised relationships between Saakashvili's government and his United National Movement (Ertiani Nationaluri Modkraoba, UNM), on

the one side and the Republicans under George W. Bush on the other also affected Washington's ability to influence events in advance of the so-called August War of 2008. According to observers, the close relationships prevented Washington from communicating effective warnings to Tbilisi to exercise caution towards the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Instead Washington more or less made Georgia's position towards the two secessionist entities its own.<sup>16</sup> Even before the events of August 2008

15 Alexander Cooley and Lincoln Mitchell, "No Way to Treat Our Friends: Recasting Recent U.S.-Georgian Relations", *Washington Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (2009): 27–41 (29); Lincoln Mitchell and Alexander Cooley, "After the August War: A New Strategy for U.S. Engagement with Georgia", special issue, *The Harriman Review* 17, no. 3–4 (New York: Harriman Institute, May 2010), 14; Gegeshidze, *Contemporary Georgian-American Relations* (see note 6), 7f.

16 Cooley and Mitchell, "No Way to Treat Our Friends" (see note 15), 36f.; Michael Kofman, "The August War, Ten Years



there had been no clear criticism from Washington of the increasingly authoritarian course of the Saakashvili government outside of confidential diplomatic channels.

## Readjustment after the August War

The August War and its aftermath did not represent an outright turning point in American-Georgian relations, but was a significant episode in two respects. Washington's verbal support remained steadfast throughout the conflict and enormous funds were provided for reconstruction (more than \$1 billion in 2008–2009).<sup>17</sup> Yet the aftermath saw growing disillusionment, at least in parts of the US political spectrum. In particular Washington became more cautious concerning military cooperation, especially aspects designed to strengthen Georgia's defensive capabilities.<sup>18</sup> From Tbilisi's perspective the August War raised questions over Washington's willingness to back Georgia against its powerful neighbour — not only rhetorically but also in practical terms — and to respond effectively to Russia's actions against Georgia. Georgians began to doubt whether the United States was on board with the Georgian narrative about the August War, or failing to live up to their expectations.<sup>19</sup>

On: A Retrospective on the Russo-Georgian War", *War on the Rocks* (online), 17 August 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/08/the-august-war-ten-years-on-a-retrospective-on-the-russo-georgian-war/> (accessed 12 August 2020). Describing the different and in some respects contradictory interpretations of the five-day war of August 2008 is beyond the scope of this study. For a detailed account see Toal, *Near Abroad* (see note 4).

**17** Mitchell and Cooley, *After the August War* (see note 15), 16; Gegeshidze, *Contemporary Georgian-American Relations* (see note 6), 10.

**18** Cory Welt, "The United States, the South Caucasus and Euro-Atlantic Integration", in *The South Caucasus – Security, Energy and Europeanization*, ed. Meliha B. Altunisik and Oktay F. Tanrisever (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 253–70 (262f.); Par Shalva Dzebisashvili, *Transforming Defence: Examining NATO's Role in Institutional Changes of South Caucasus Countries (A Comparative Study of Armenia and Georgia)*, Ph.D. diss., Universität Bielefeld and Université Libre de Bruxelles, 2016, 259; Nilsson, "Role Conceptions, Crises, and Georgia's Foreign Policy" (see note 9), 456.

**19** Svante E. Cornell, "The Raucous Caucasus", *The American Interest* (online), 2 May 2017, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2017/05/02/the-raucous-caucasus/>; George Khe-

The Democrat Barack Obama was elected US President in November 2008 — just a few months after the August War — and succeeded his Republican predecessor Bush in January 2009. Now the personalised nature of relations between Washington and Tbilisi became a drawback: When the Republican President left the White House the Saakashvili government lost its contacts in the administration. Its good relationships in Congress and influential think-tanks remained important, however.<sup>20</sup> While external observers regarded this process of depersonalisation of mutual relations as necessary and "healthy", it may at least at first have confirmed Georgian perceptions that the Obama administration had abandoned its predecessor's prioritisation of their country.

## Continuities and Discontinuities under Obama and Georgian Dream

Under Mikheil Saakashvili and George W. Bush relations between Georgia and the United States were highly symbolically charged, ideologically driven and personalised. During Barack Obama's two terms the tone became more sober. Georgia now experienced geostrategic downsizing, after a period where successful lobbying and close personal contacts in Washington had enabled the "construction of strategic importance".<sup>21</sup> This strategy became harder to pursue with the Obama administration.

lashvili, *Georgia's Foreign Policy Impasse: Is Consensus Crumbling?* Ponars Eurasia Policy Memo 187 (Washington, D.C.: The George Washington University Elliott School of International Affairs, September 2011), 1, <http://www.ucss.ge/Khelashvili%20ponars-%20187-2011-09.pdf> (accessed 12 August 2020).

**20** George Khelashvili, "Obama and Georgia: A Year-Long Awkward Silence", *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, no. 13 (2010): 8–10 (9); Gegeshidze, *Contemporary Georgian-American Relations* (see note 6), 10–12.

**21** Alexander Cooley and Daniel Nexon, "Interpersonal Networks and International Security: US-Georgia Relations during the Bush Administration", in *The New Power Politics: Networks and Transnational Security Governance*, ed. Deborah Avant and Oliver Westerwinter (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 74–102.

## Under Obama Georgia experienced geostrategic downsizing in Washington.

Alongside the depersonalisation of relations with Georgia, Obama began his presidency with a so-called reset with Russia. Washington's intention was to halt the downward spiral and turn Russia into a partner at the international level.<sup>22</sup> Although Obama declared that the reset would not occur at the expense of countries like Georgia, the visibility of Georgia and the South Caucasus as a whole did decline. There was no regional strategy in which US policy towards Georgia could have been embedded. Instead the focus of US foreign policy turned to other regions like Asia and the Middle East.<sup>23</sup> One sign of that shift was that Saakashvili and Obama did not meet in a bilateral context until the third year of Obama's presidency.<sup>24</sup>

A significant political change occurred in Georgia too: In the 2012 parliamentary elections Saakashvili's United National Movement lost to the billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream coalition. Although Saakashvili remained president until 2013 his influence was heavily curtailed under the new parliamentary system. Even if the Obama administration placed less importance on Georgia and formerly highly personalised relations became institutionalised, Washington still remained the "second arena of Georgian politics".<sup>25</sup> Tbilisi continued to attribute great signifi-

cance to Washington, also — but not only — in the context of the national elections in 2012. That is reflected not least in the sums paid by both Saakashvili and Ivanishvili to private lobbying firms to promote the one and discredit the other. Between them they reportedly spent about \$4.8 million. The French daily *Le Figaro* described this as the "Guerre des lobbies géorgiens à Washington".<sup>26</sup>

As this demonstrates, the political changes in Washington and Tbilisi did not upturn every aspect of American-Georgian relations. At least during Georgian Dream's first term (2012 to 2016) the new leadership in Tbilisi included a string of decidedly pro-Western, pro-American politicians in key posts. These included Defence Minister Irakli Alasania (2012–2014), Defence Minister Tina Khidasheli (2015–2016), Speaker of Parliament David Usupashvili (2012–2016) and Tedo Japaridze, chair of the parliamentary foreign affairs committee (2012–2016). Their significance for Georgian-American relations in this period should not be underestimated. Many in Washington were wary of Ivanishvili in particular. With his new government propagating a normalisation of relations with Russia, concerns grew that Tbilisi might abandon its Euro-Atlantic course.<sup>27</sup>

Georgia's political parties are often hard to distinguish in ideological or even merely programmatic terms. It is even harder in the case of the Georgian Dream alliance, led by Ivanishvili's party, Georgian Dream — Democratic Georgia (Kartuli ocneba — Demok'rat'iuli Sakartvelo). In 2012 the Georgian Dream coalition brought together very heterogeneous currents. It tended to be associated with support for the welfare state while Saakashvili's United National

- 22 Brian Whitmore, "Georgia Rethinks the 'Reset'", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (online), 24 June 2010, [https://www.rferl.org/a/Georgia\\_Rethinks\\_The\\_Reset/2081523.html](https://www.rferl.org/a/Georgia_Rethinks_The_Reset/2081523.html) (accessed 12 August 2020); Thomas de Waal, "More Than Georgia on Obama's Mind", *National Interest* (online), 23 February 2012, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2012/02/23/more-than-georgia-on-obama-s-mind/bb29> (accessed 12 August 2020). The outgoing Bush administration had in fact already toned down its rhetoric towards Russia and prepared the ground for such a reorientation. See Pertti Joenniemi, *The Georgian-Russian Conflict: A Turning-point?* DIIS Working Paper 2 (Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies [DIIS], 2010), [https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep13369?seq=1#meta\\_data\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep13369?seq=1#meta_data_info_tab_contents) (accessed 12 August 2020). On the reset see also Ruth Deyermond, "Assessing the Reset: Successes and Failures in the Obama Administration's Russia Policy, 2009–2012", *European Security* 22, no. 4 (2013): 500–23.
- 23 Cornell, "The Raucous Caucasus" (see note 19); Khelashvili, "Obama and Georgia" (see note 20), 9.
- 24 De Waal, "More Than Georgia on Obama's Mind" (see note 22).
- 25 Thomas de Waal, *Mrs. Clinton Goes to Georgia* (Brussels: Carnegie Europe, 4 June 2012), <https://carnegieeurope.eu/>

2012/06/04/mrs.-clinton-goes-to-georgia-pub-48338 (accessed 12 August 2020). The Ukraine conflict did, however, draw Washington's attention back to countries like Georgia, while US relations with Russia deteriorated significantly.

26 Laure Mandeville, "Guerre des lobbies géorgiens à Washington", *Le Figaro* (online), 21 June 2012, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2012/06/21/01003-20120621ARTFIG00577-guerre-des-lobbies-georgiens-a-washington.php> (accessed 12 August 2020). On Georgian lobbying in Washington see also Kevin Bogardus and Julian Pecquet, "K Street's Gravy Train Runs Dry as Georgian Leaders Move Past Election", *The Hill* (online), 6 March 2013, <https://thehill.com/policy/international/286425-k-streets-gravy-train-runs-dry-as-georgia-moves-past-election> (accessed 12 August 2020).

27 S. Neil MacFarlane, *Two Years of the Dream: Georgian Foreign Policy during the Transition*, Russia and Eurasia Programme (London: Chatham House, 2015), 3, 9.

Movement (UNM) pursued liberal or libertarian domestic economic policies, but personalities were more important than programmes.<sup>28</sup> In foreign policy the UNM stood out for its highly negative stance towards Russia and sought to monopolise this position within the political landscape. Georgian Dream called for a pragmatic, less conflictual relationship.

**The new coalition government took up where its predecessor left off, and retaining the objective of Euro-Atlantic integration.**

In fact the new coalition government took up where its predecessor left off, retaining the objective of Euro-Atlantic integration.<sup>29</sup> This was codified in a cross-party resolution adopted by the Georgian parliament in 2013 and reconfirmed in 2016. It defines membership of the EU and NATO as priorities, along with expanding relations with the United States as the most important strategic partner and ally.<sup>30</sup> Tbilisi also continued to participate in US-led international missions, including the Georgian contingent in Afghanistan; under Georgian Dream Georgia still provided the largest contingent of any non-NATO state in Afghanistan.<sup>31</sup> The military sphere — especially with-

in the framework of NATO — is where relations continued to deepen even under Obama and Georgian Dream. In 2014 Georgia was declared a “NATO Enhanced Opportunities” partner and the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package (SNGP) was launched. But Georgia’s wish for a Membership Action Plan remained unfulfilled.<sup>32</sup>

28 Levan Kakhishvili, *The Socializing Effects of Georgian Parties’ Membership in European Political Party Federations* (Tbilisi: Georgian Institute of Politics, October 2018).

29 Levan Kakhishvili, *Protests in Tbilisi: What Can Be Learned about the Role of Russia as an Issue in Georgian Party Competition?* (Tbilisi: Georgian Institute of Politics, 4 July 2019), <http://gip.ge/protests-in-tbilisi-what-can-be-learned-about-the-role-of-russia-as-an-issue-in-georgian-party-competition/>; Kakachia et al., “Change and Continuity in the Foreign Policies of Small States” (see note 4); Markedonov and Suchkov, “Russia and the United States in the Caucasus” (see note 4), 187.

30 “Parliament Adopts Bipartisan Resolution on Foreign Policy”, *Civil.ge* (online), 7 March 2013, <https://civil.ge/archives/122665> (accessed 1 October 2020); “Parliament Adopts Resolution on Foreign Policy”, *Civil.ge* (online), 30 December 2016, <https://civil.ge/archives/126043> (accessed 1 October 2010); *Resolution of the Parliament of Georgia on the Foreign Policy of Georgia*, “unofficial translation”, <http://www.parliament.ge/en/ajax/downloadFile/53452/Resolution> (accessed 12 August 2020). The Euro-Atlantic course is also embedded in other strategic documents, including the National Military Strategy of 2014, <https://mod.gov.ge/uploads/2018/pdf/NMS-ENG.pdf>.

31 David Usupashvili, “Georgia, a Democratic Dream in the Making”, *The Hill* (online), 11 March 2013, <https://thehill.com/policy/international/287167-parliament-leader-david-usupa>

shvili-georgia-a-democratic-dream-in-the-making (accessed 12 August 2020). Georgia participated both in ISAF and in its successor, Resolute Support.

32 For a closer examination of US-Georgian security and defence cooperation and relations between Georgia and NATO from 2008, see pp. 22ff. in this publication.



# Strategic Partners: Aspirations, Ambiguities, Irritations

The review of the development of US-Georgia relations laid out above supplies essential background for assessing developments during the Trump administration and Georgian Dream's second term. On the one hand, it identifies path dependencies in the sense of persistent practices that survive to this day. On the other, comparison with earlier episodes reveals the heights with which the current relationship must be compared (and the source of expectations on both sides of the very unequal bilateral relationship).

The current format of relations has existed at the institutional level since 2009. While NATO created the NATO-Georgia Commission after the August War, the signing of the US-Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership on 9 January 2009, in consultation with the incoming Obama administration, established a new bilateral Georgian-American format. The first annual meeting of the Strategic Partnership Commission was held on 22 June 2009. To this day the Strategic Partnership structures mutual cooperation as the "primary mechanism for organizing and prioritizing the broad and deepening cooperation between the US and Georgia", including bringing together high-ranking actors from both sides for regular meetings.<sup>33</sup> The question arose whether the Strategic Partnership between Tbilisi and Washington — like the NATO-Georgia Commission — must instead be regarded as a consolation prize. The Georgian side for its part lauded it — at least publicly — as a further step towards becoming an alliance partner of the United States.<sup>34</sup>

**33** U.S. Department of State, "Joint Statement of the U.S.-Georgia Strategic Partnership Commission Defense and Security Cooperation Working Group", press release, 1 October 2018, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-of-the-u-s-georgia-strategic-partnership-commission-defense-and-security-cooperation-working-group-2/> (accessed 12 August 2020).

**34** Mitchell and Cooley, *After the August War* (see note 15), 17f., 22. In order to avoid misunderstandings, the American Georgia experts Mitchell and Cooley advise Washington to

It would not be entirely accurate to characterise the American-Georgian Strategic Partnership as a rigid, predetermined format, even if its form has remained unchanged since it was established. The four core areas — namely (a) democracy and governance, (b) defence and security, (c) economic, trade and energy cooperation and (d) people-to-people and cultural exchanges — have remained constant throughout and roughly circumscribe the extent of mutual cooperation. Democracy/governance and defence/security in particular attract special attention for various reasons and offer insights into developments in the shared and individual agendas, into reciprocal expectations and into the function attributed to the Strategic Partnership — and thus also into the nature of the mutual relationship altogether.

## Strategic Partnership as Democratisation Imperative

From the outset the Strategic Partnership prioritised democracy and governance, not least in response to criticisms that Washington had long neglected to address the democratic deficits that existed under Mikheil Saakashvili. According to the United States — Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership, the cooperation is both based on shared values including democracy and rule of law and intended to strengthen them

clarify that the Strategic Partnership with Georgia does not provide security guarantees. Cory Welt, *How Strategic Is the US-Georgia Strategic Partnership?*, in the seminar series Limited Sovereignty and Soft Borders in Southeastern Europe and the Former Soviet States: The Challenges and Political Consequences of Future Changes in Legal Status (New York: Harriman Institute, Columbia University, March 2010); idem., *Georgia: Background and U.S. Policy*, CRS Report 45307 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service [CRS], 1 April 2019), 1.

## Strategic Partnership – an Undefined Concept

The concept of the Strategic Partnership is a chameleon of international relations. The spectrum of strategic partnerships is as broad as the motivations behind them – which need not necessarily be identical on both sides.<sup>a</sup> While some strategic partnerships are based on shared norms and values, in other cases the designation indicates such congruence – if at all – more as a long-term goal than a starting point or current state of affairs. The term certainly does not always indicate a special or especially close relationship: “Some partnerships link friends or potential friends; some link actual or putative rivals.”<sup>b</sup> Neither in foreign policy practice nor in the academic discussion is there a standard definition. The lowest common denominator appears to be that it concerns “a specific form of bilateral diplomatic engagement”.<sup>c</sup> More recently researchers have been categorising strategic partnerships under the heading of “alignment”. Unlike an “alliance”, which clearly relates to security, alignment is neutral in values and content and therefore well suited to capture the more recent multi-dimensional and flexible formats of international relations.<sup>d</sup>

The empirical diversity of strategic partnerships, and the lack of an accepted definition, raises the question of the extent to which they actually represent a concrete form of foreign policy cooperation at all, or whether they are not simply rhetorical devices or pure lip service.<sup>e</sup> What that overlooks is that strategic partnerships are not static and their content not fixed. They are social constructs that change and develop in the process of discursive interaction – the “conversation” – between the involved parties; they are politically imagined and jointly shaped by the involved actors. The answer to the question “What is a strategic partnership?”<sup>f</sup> is thus: “Strategic partnerships are what states make of them.”<sup>g</sup>

**a** The political scientists Pan and Michalski for example reveal the degree of variation in their typology, in which they distinguish a) homogeneous, b) functional (“come-in-hand”), c) marriage-of-convenience, and d) heterogeneous strategic partnerships. Zhongqi Pan and Anna Michalski, “Contending Logics of Strategic Partnership in International Politics”, *Asia Europe Journal* 17 (2019): 265–80 (275–278). On the different motivations see also Sean Kay, “What Is a Strategic Partnership?” *Problems of Post-Communism* 47, no. 3 (2000): 15–24.

**b** H. D. P. Envall and Ian Hall, “Asian Strategic Partnerships: New Practices and Regional Security Governance”, *Asian Politics and Policy* 8, no. 1 (2016): 87–105 (88).

**c** Pan and Michalski, “Contending Logics of Strategic Partnership” (see note **a**), 267.

**d** Colleen Chidley, “Towards a Framework of Alignment in International Relations”, *Politikon* 41, no. 1 (2014): 141–57 (143, 146); Thomas S. Wilkins, “‘Alignment’, Not ‘Alliance’ – The Shifting Paradigm of International Security Cooperation: Toward a Conceptual Taxonomy of Alignment”, *Review of International Studies* 38, no. 1 (2012): 53–76. Chidley goes further than Wilkins, arguing that the term “alignment” needs to be completely stripped of any security connotations. Wilkins on the other hand sees the difference in the treaty commitment to provide military assistance, which characterises an “alliance” but is not necessarily given with “alignment”.

**e** Wilkins, “‘Alignment’, Not ‘Alliance’” (see note **d**), 67.

**f** Kay, “What Is a Strategic Partnership?” (see note **a**).

**g** Andriy Tyushka and Lucyna Czechowska, “Strategic Partnerships, International Politics and IR Theory”, in *States, International Organizations and Strategic Partnerships*, ed. Lucyna Czechowska et al. (Cheltenham, 2019), 8–43 (36).

in Georgia.<sup>35</sup> Observers regard the second component as one of Washington’s principal interests, creating a strong asymmetry in the partnership through a one-sided orientation on identifying and overcoming internal political deficits on the Georgian side.<sup>36</sup> That prioritisation remains current, as evidenced by the 10th Anniversary Joint Declaration on the U.S. – Georgia Strategic Partnership of June 2019. Like its prede-

cessor in 2009, the Declaration ten years later also lists promoting an independent judiciary, democratic elections, media pluralism and democratic checks and balances in Georgia as objectives of cooperation. It explicitly notes that the United States and Georgia will cooperate on these matters with “all stakeholders”.<sup>37</sup> As the developments of 2020 underline, Washington continues to regard a “democratisation imperative” as central to the Strategic Partnership – despite the diverging transactional rhetoric from President Trump’s White House.

<sup>35</sup> U.S. Department of State, “United States-Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership”, press release, 9 January 2009, <https://www.state.gov/united-states-georgia-charter-on-strategic-partnership/> (accessed 17 March 2020).

<sup>36</sup> Mitchell and Cooley, *After the August War* (see note 15), 18; Welt, *How Strategic Is the US-Georgia Strategic Partnership?* (see note 34), 2, 10. The NATO-Georgia Commission established following the August War also focusses on democratic and institutional reforms.

<sup>37</sup> U.S. Department of State, “10th Anniversary Joint Declaration on the U.S.-Georgia Strategic Partnership”, press release, 11 June 2019, <https://www.state.gov/10th-anniversary-joint-declaration-on-the-u-s-georgia-strategic-partnership/> (accessed 17 March 2020).

## Critical Letters from Washington

In winter 2019/20 senior members of the US House of Representatives and Senate sent critical letters to the Georgian government, occasioned in the first place by the conflict between government and opposition over the modalities for the October 2020 parliamentary elections. In connection with protests in summer 2019 the government had promised electoral reform, and taken on board the protesters' demand that the 2020 elections be held under a fully proportional system. In the Washington news outlet *The Hill*, which is widely read by US politicians from both main parties, the then Georgian Prime Minister Mamuka Bakhtadze presented the electoral reform as having already occurred.<sup>38</sup> But the parliamentary vote in autumn 2019 failed because many deputies from the ruling party chose not to support it. After a series of meetings facilitated by Western diplomats the government and opposition agreed a new compromise on 8 March 2020. As far as the government was concerned the reform was implemented in June 2020, when parliament passed the amendments to the electoral law. The most important innovation was that in the October 2020 parliamentary election 120 rather than previously just 77 of the 150 seats were determined by proportional representation.<sup>39</sup> According to the official results Georgian Dream won the October vote, gaining 90 seats. Opposition parties, however, disputed the results, condemned the vote as rigged and boycotted the run-offs. As in the spring, US and EU diplomats sought to facilitate talks between Georgian

Dream and the opposition to find a way out of the ensuing political deadlock.

The criticisms laid out in the letters go further, however. The two co-chairs of the U.S. Congressional Georgia Caucus,<sup>40</sup> the Republican Adam Kinzinger and the Democrat Gerald Connolly, wrote on 13 December 2019 to Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia that they were “shocked to hear about the collapse of promised reforms” and concerned about “reports of violence against peaceful protesters”.<sup>41</sup> On 21 January 2020 Connolly and Kinzinger upped the ante, writing to Gakharia again, together with the Democrat Eliot Engel, Chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and the Republican Michael McCaul, ranking member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee: They stressed the importance of ensuring the legitimacy of the parliamentary elections, criticised indications of politicisation of the judiciary and dissemination of anti-Western sentiment through allegedly Georgian Dream-funded Facebook accounts, and underlined that “recent democratic and economic trends are negatively affecting Georgia’s image in the United States”. Democratic institutions had to be strengthened, they concluded, “so that Georgia can continue to be a strategic partner of the United States”.<sup>42</sup> A letter from the Republican Jim Risch, Chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and the Democrat Jeanne Shaheen, ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Europe and Regional Security Cooperation followed a week later, on 29 January 2020, expressing their “deep concern with recent developments” to the Georgian prime minister. They saw signs of “democratic backsliding” and were “particularly concerned that the independence of Georgia’s judicial system is being undermined”. Risch and Shaheen note that the described events “raise questions about Georgia’s commitment to our shared values”. They conclude by reiterating

38 “Most recently, our younger generation requested that we expedite our existing plans to make our parliament more representative through a fully proportional electoral system. We made that change quickly, and we are excited that this change in the 2020 elections will empower greater political participation and a more open political playing field.” Mamuka Bakhtadze, “Support Act Will Bolster Georgia’s Trade and Security Partnership with America”, *The Hill* (online), 9 August 2019, <https://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/foreign-policy/456886-support-act-will-bolster-georgias-trade-and-security> (accessed 19 May 2020).

39 Two opposition groups, the United National Movement and European Georgia, were dissatisfied with the compromise and boycotted the vote. “Georgia Transforms Electoral System ahead of October Parliamentary Elections”, *OC Media* (online), 29 June 2020, <https://oc-media.org/georgia-transforms-electoral-system-ahead-of-october-parliamentary-elections/> (accessed 12 August 2020).

40 The U.S. Congressional Georgia Caucus is a bipartisan group of members who are interested in US-Georgian relations.

41 Adam Kinzinger, *Twitter*, 16 December 2019, <https://twitter.com/RepKinzinger/status/1206611365894524929>.

42 Letter of Adam Kinzinger, Gerald E. Connolly, Eliot L. Engel and Michael T. McCaul to Giorgi Gakharia, Prime Minister of Georgia, 21 January 2020, <https://freebeacon.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Kinzinger-Jan-2020-letter.pdf> (accessed 15 September 2020).

that “we may be forced to reevaluate our partnership”.<sup>43</sup>

While the validity of the specific criticisms cannot be addressed in detail here, a brief review of relevant indices provides context. The democracy status indicator of the Bertelsmann Transformation Atlas, for example, indicates a decline between 2018 and 2020 (6.8 to 6.6), although both years are noticeably better than 2010 (6.05). Rule of law shows an improvement from 5.5 (2010) to 6.3 (2020), although again with a slightly negative recent trend (2016 and 2018: 6.5).<sup>44</sup> The Liberal Democracy Index of the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project and the EIU’s Democracy Index show similar findings. The former registers an improvement between 2010 and 2019 (from 0.33 to 0.5), but a decline since 2015 (0.61).<sup>45</sup> For rule of law the figures for 2010 and 2019 are identical (0.81), with a fall since 2018 (0.85).<sup>46</sup> The EIU’s Democracy Index also indicates improvement from 2010 to 2019 (4.59 vs. 5.42), although the figure for 2019 is thus lower than those for 2013 (5.95), 2017 and 2016 (both 5.93).<sup>47</sup> Although there are naturally limits to the usefulness of such heavily aggregated indicators, they do suggest an identifiable general trend: There have indeed been setbacks in democracy and rule of law during Georgian Dream’s second term, although these have not to date been so grave as to reverse the positive developments since 2012.

The critical letters from Washington are notable for several reasons. Firstly they indicate at least a blip in Congress’s narrative about and towards Georgia. Bipartisan goodwill in Congress had hitherto been a

central trope of Georgian-American relations, and an important constant through changing administrations. This consensus, which had been driven in particular by Georgia’s democratic development, seems to be more fragile than it had appeared. It remains to be seen whether this divergence is more than transient. But the critics are clearly not light-weights.<sup>48</sup> Connolly and Kinzinger in particular actually stood for a further deepening of American-Georgian relations, and both — Connolly especially — played decisive roles in shepherding the Georgia Support Act through the House of Representatives on 22 October 2019, in other words just a few weeks prior to their letters. The Act, if adopted, will make it US policy to “support Georgia’s sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity”<sup>49</sup> through measures including enhanced security and defence cooperation. The Georgian embassy in Washington hailed the Act as “historic”.<sup>50</sup>

It should also be noted that Congress’s influence on foreign policy has grown. One reason for this was the incoherence of the Trump White House and the sidelining of the State Department — which can also to an extent be regarded as a result of Trump’s politics. Congress’s foreign policy repertoire includes imposing sanctions and allocating budget funds to particular countries. This could have positive or negative implications for Georgia. Donald Trump initially proposed cutting US funding for Georgia, but Congress prevented this. The draft bill on appropriations for foreign aid for fiscal year 2021, as passed by the House of Representatives, does include a provision that the disbursement of 15 percent of the \$132 million earmarked for Georgia is conditional on progress with democratic institutions, the fight against corruption and the rule of law. That clause is lacking in the version approved by the Senate’s Appropriations Com-

43 United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, “Risch, Shaheen Express Concern for Potential Backsliding of Georgian Democracy and Governance”, press release, 29 January 2020, <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/press/chair/release/risch-shaheen-express-concern-for-potential-backsliding-of-georgian-democracy-and-governance> (accessed 12 August 2020).

44 Bertelsmann Transformation Atlas, “Democracy Status: Georgia. 2010 – 2020”, 2020, [https://atlas.bti-project.org/share.php?1\\*2020\\*CV:CTC:SELAFG\\*CAT\\*AFG\\*REG:TAB](https://atlas.bti-project.org/share.php?1*2020*CV:CTC:SELAFG*CAT*AFG*REG:TAB).

45 A slight improvement from 0.53 to 0.56 occurred between 2017 and 2018, but that does not alter the broader trend since 2015.

46 Varieties of Democracy, “Country Graph: Georgia”, 6 September 2020, <https://www.v-dem.net/en/analysis/CountryGraph/>.

47 Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), *Democracy Index 2019: A Year of Democratic Setbacks and Popular Protest* (London et al., 2020), 18.

48 As well as the named cases, other members of Congress also wrote critical letters; in some cases, though, they also appear to have been pursuing particular interests. See the section “Strategic Partnership as Washington’s Gateway to Eurasia” in this publication.

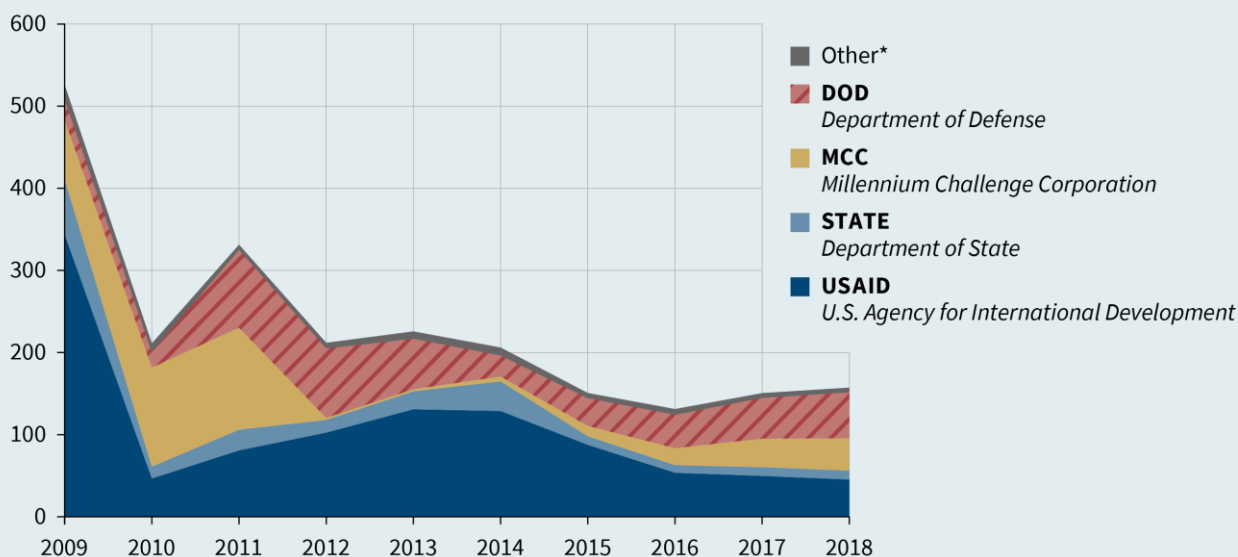
49 Georgia Support Act, H.R. 598, 116th Cong. (2019 – 20), <https://www.congress.gov/bills/116th-congress/house-bill/598/text> (accessed 3 December 2020).

50 The Embassy of Georgia to the United States of America, “US House of Representatives Passes Georgia Support Act”, press release, 22 October 2019, <http://georgiaembassyusa.org/2019/10/22/us-house-of-representatives-passes-georgia-support-act/> (accessed 12 August 2020). In December 2020, Senate approval was still pending.

Figure 1

**US foreign aid to Georgia by sector (disbursements)**

US\$ million



\* Department of the Treasury, Department of Agriculture, Department of Health and Human Services, Department of the Army, Department of the Interior, Department of Justice, Department of Labor, Department of Commerce, Department of Energy, Department of Homeland Security, Peace Corps, Trade and Development Agency, Open World Leadership Center, Department of the Navy, Department of the Air Force.

Source: USAID, Foreign Aid Explorer (as of 19 October 2020)

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mittee. The bill still needs final Senate approval and must be signed into law by the President.<sup>51</sup> It remains to be seen whether members of Congress are serious about putting the Strategic Partnership on the line on account of a perceived gap between expectation and reality, or whether this is simply a rhetorical device to lend weight to their calls for democratic reforms.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Joshua Kucera, "Georgia: Trump Administration Boosting Military Aid", *Eurasianet*, 14 November 2017, <https://eurasianet.org/georgia-trump-administration-boosting-military-aid> (accessed 13 August 2020); *State, Foreign Operations, Agriculture, Rural Development, Interior, Environment, Military Construction, and Veterans Affairs Appropriations Act, 2021* (Washington, D.C., 30 July 2020), 239f., <https://www.congress.gov/116/bills/hr7608/BILLS-116hr7608rfs.pdf> (accessed 9 October 2020).

<sup>52</sup> Tbilisi cannot have been entirely surprised by the public criticism from Washington in winter 2019/20, nor was it restricted to Congress. The state of Georgia's democracy was reportedly also discussed at the meeting between Prime Minister Bakhtadze and US Secretary of State Pompeo in summer 2019, as well as during the autumn 2019 visit to Washington

## Image Issues: Projection versus Reception

There is a degree of "image dissonance",<sup>53</sup> at least in the area of democracy and governance. The image that the Georgian government conveys — or would like to convey — does not come over as completely convincing in Washington. Such divergences are

by Georgian Defence Minister Irakli Gharibashvili. The U.S. Department of State's *Georgia 2019 Human Rights Report* published in March 2020 also notes deficits in judicial independence and restrictions on the right of assembly. U.S. Department of State, *Georgia 2019 Human Rights Report* (Washington, D.C., March 2020), <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/GEORGIA-2019-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf>.

<sup>53</sup> Ben D. Mor, "Credibility Talk in Public Diplomacy", *Review of International Studies* 38, no. 2 (2012): 393–422 (394). Here it should also be mentioned that America's own image has suffered under Donald Trump. Most recently circumstances of the almost simultaneous elections in the United States and Georgia led some US Georgia experts to question Washington's credibility in commenting on the conduct of elections in Georgia.



nothing new. Washington's decision to create the Strategic Partnership in the first place is attributed to democratic deficits during Saakashvili's presidency, or as a response to them. It is therefore not entirely credible when the UNM and the former parliamentary opposition politically instrumentalise the criticisms.<sup>54</sup> The scepticism expressed in Washington and the treatment of Georgian Dream do, however, suggest that the government finds it hard, or at least harder than its predecessor, to establish its own interpretation of particular events and developments in Washington.<sup>55</sup>

**Washington is not completely convinced by the image Georgia conveys – or would like to convey.**

One reason for the divergences with the US Congress, representatives of the Georgian governing party argue, is misinformation, which they attribute above all to activities of the Georgian political opposition in Washington.<sup>56</sup> It is quite possible that the opposition does continue to maintain good contacts in US political circles and also employs them for its own ends, in other words against the Georgian Dream government. Critical NGOs with contacts to institutions in the United States likely also play a role. On the other hand it is apparent that Georgian Dream is less successful at establishing rapport in Washington. Between December 2019 and February 2020 – in the period immediately before the imposition of international travel restrictions in response to the Covid-19 pandemic – a string of leading figures flew to Washington to rectify the presumed information deficit: the deputy speaker of parliament and the secretary-general of Georgian Dream (December 2019), the speaker of parliament (February 2020) and the foreign minister (February 2020). Like the United

National Movement before it, Georgian Dream also engaged PR firms to conduct “impression management” in Washington.<sup>57</sup> In spring 2020 it hired Hogan Lovells and DCI Group to step up such activities. As laid out in the contract, DCI Group's remit was to “promote Georgian Dream as a reliable and pragmatic partner for democracy, peace and stability with unwavering commitment to Western democratic liberal ideals and the special Georgia-U.S. relationship”.<sup>58</sup> Altogether the party spent about \$1.2 million on lobbying services. Its contract with Hogan Lovells runs until the end of January 2021, the one with DCI Group ended on 31 October 2020, the date of the first round of the Georgian parliamentary elections.

Despite these PR activities, the party's founder and current leader Bidzina Ivanishvili receives an unfavourable mention in a report published on 10 June 2020 by the Republican Study Committee, a caucus of conservatives in the House of Representatives. On the one hand, the document, which was written as a guide for Congress on national security and foreign policy, describes Georgia as a “democratic U.S. ally” and recommends expanding security and defence cooperation and enacting the Georgia Support Act. Elsewhere, however, Ivanishvili is mentioned in the context of US sanctions against associates of Vladimir Putin: “Bidzina Ivanishvili, the richest man in Georgia, is a close ally of Putin and involved in destabilizing Georgia on Russia's behalf.”<sup>59</sup> The reference to Iva-

<sup>57</sup> In 2019 the Georgian government concluded or renewed contracts for political lobbying in Washington with the PR firms Chartwell Strategy Group, StrateVarious LLC and Hill+Knowlton Strategies; the total spend was reportedly close to \$3 million. “Government Hires New Company for U.S. Lobbying”, *Civil.ge* (online), 8 April 2019, <https://civil.ge/archives/301452> (accessed 12 August 2020); Thomas Moore, “Two Public Affairs Firms Hired by Country of Georgia”, *prweek.com* (online), 11 February 2019, <https://www.prweek.com/article/1525455/two-public-affairs-firms-hired-country-georgia> (accessed 12 August 2020).

<sup>58</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, *Exhibit A to Registration Statement* (Washington, D.C., 12 February 2020), <https://efile.fara.gov/docs/6278-Exhibit-AB-20200212-16.pdf> (accessed 12 August 2020). For the contract with Hogan Lovells see *idem*, *Exhibit A to Registration Statement* (Washington, D.C., 8 February 2020), <https://efile.fara.gov/docs/2244-Exhibit-AB-20200208-90.pdf> (accessed 12 August 2020).

<sup>59</sup> Republican Study Committee's Task Force on National Security and Foreign Affairs, *Strengthening America and Countering Global Threats: The RSC National Security Strategy* (Washington, D.C., 10 June 2020), 34, 36, <https://rsc-johnson.house.gov/sites/repUBLICANSTUDYCOMMITTEE.house.gov/files/%5BFINA>

<sup>54</sup> The United National Movement split in early 2017, when a group of deputies broke away to found the Movement for Liberty – European Georgia.

<sup>55</sup> The reactions also demonstrate that the Georgian leadership is indeed sensitive to criticism from Washington. Frank Schimmelfennig, “Goffman Meets IR: Dramaturgical Action in International Community”, *International Review of Sociology* 12, no. 3 (2002): 417–37.

<sup>56</sup> Zaal Anjaparidze, “Impact of Western Support and Reprimand on Georgian Politics”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 17, no. 25 (24 February 2020), <https://jamestown.org/program/impact-of-western-support-and-reprimand-on-georgian-politics/> (accessed 12 August 2020).

nishvili indicates first of all that even eight years after Georgian Dream's 2012 election victory he still suffers a dubious image in Washington; as well as his tendency to operate behind the scenes, his earlier business career in Russia is often mentioned. While observers in Washington point out that Ivanishvili himself has never made an official visit to the United States, his opportunities to do so were actually limited: he only occupied an official function for a little more than a year, serving as prime minister from October 2012 to November 2013. Adding to the irritation, in a television interview in late 2019 Ivanishvili made critical comments about the activities of US-funded democracy promoters in Georgia, where he specifically named the International Republican Institute and the National Democratic Institute.

Another challenge for Georgian Dream is that over time many explicitly transatlantic-leaning figures in its own ranks, with good contacts in Washington, have stepped down from active roles in the party and/or the government. The end of the governing coalition's first term in 2016 saw a string of pro-Western figures leave the political stage, especially in association with the departure of the Free Democrats and the Republican Party. Following the failure in late 2019 to pass the electoral reform another group of deputies who were known for their interest in foreign policy and Euro-Atlantic leanings left the party in protest.

### Contradictory Role Conceptions

Georgia still boasts a commendable democratic record in regional comparison. The developments outlined above do, however, indicate that — as already under Saakashvili — the issues of democracy, rule of law and good governance also present pitfalls for the current Georgian leadership when it comes to justifying Georgia's "strategic significance" for the United States and deepening the Strategic Partnership.

L%5D%20NSTF%20Report.pdf (accessed 13 August 2020). On the discussion about the document's significance in and for Georgia, see also "RSC Report Receives Mixed Reaction in Georgia", *Netgazeti*, 12 June 2020 (via *BBC Monitoring Caucasus*, 16 June 2020).

### Tbilisi strives to expand the Strategic Partnership beyond questions of democracy and rule of law.

The reason for this is that in these areas the domestic and external roles, role expectations and behavioural norms do not always coincide. The national sphere is where political actors are principally socialised, roles are shaped, and important political offices distributed; in other words, this is where the motives are primarily located.<sup>60</sup> The Saakashvili government already had to deal with role conflicts created by its increasingly authoritarian course.<sup>61</sup> The current leadership under Georgian Dream is also attempting to avoid or manage role conflicts. For example it is seeking to flesh out the Strategic Partnership — above and beyond questions of democracy and rule of law — to enrich the shared Georgian-American agenda with "its own" themes or to highlight particular issues. Under Georgian Dream the area of defence and security remains a suitable and central field for this from the Georgian perspective.

### Strategic Partnership as Risk-Sharing

Security and defence cooperation continues to play an outstanding role in Georgian-American relations. It remains embedded in the broader context of NATO-Georgia-relations, but extends a good deal further than the bilateral cooperation with other NATO members. Already under Saakashvili Georgia's understanding of its role vis-à-vis the United States extended well beyond the Bush administration's democratisation agenda. Tbilisi also sought to position itself as a dependable partner in the security sphere. One important component here was the participation of Georgian troops in US-led operations. Especially after the 2008 August War this was intended to communicate that Georgia was not just a security consumer but had its own positive contribution to make to international

<sup>60</sup> Schimmelfennig, "Goffman Meets IR" (see note 55), 420.

<sup>61</sup> Nilsson, "Role Conceptions, Crises, and Georgia's Foreign Policy" (see note 9). As his democratic image crumbled, Saakashvili increasingly turned to anti-Russian attitudes among US Republicans as the basis for the bilateral relationship. Lincoln Mitchell, *Neutrality for Georgia: A Possible View from Washington* (Vienna: Institut für Sicherheitspolitik, 7 December 2019), <https://www.institutfuersicherheit.at/neutrality-of-georgia-a-possible-view-from-washington/> (accessed 15 September 2020).

security.<sup>62</sup> Georgian Dream continued this practice. For example then Prime Minister Bakhtadze said in a joint press statement with Secretary of State Pompeo in summer 2019: “Georgia is America’s loyal partner in [sic] the global stage. Our friendship is time-tested and our bonds are forged in combat.”<sup>63</sup>

On the one hand the Trump administration’s agenda was less ideological and thus also less coherent than Bush’s had been. Its messaging to external partners on role expectations was therefore likewise less clear. On the other hand Donald Trump’s transactional style of politics offered opportunities for Georgia to further deepen cooperation, especially in the sphere of security. Tbilisi’s official statements on the Strategic Partnership and on relations with the United States reveal how it sought to use the transactional approach for its own ends. One new topos in the Georgian narrative in recent years has been the matter of Georgia’s contribution to military burden-sharing. As then Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili put it in May 2018: “Georgia honors its part of the partnership bargain by fighting alongside America and its NATO allies in hotspots like Iraq and Afghanistan, where Georgia has suffered more casualties per capita than any NATO country except the United States. Georgia’s spending on defense well exceeds NATO’s two percent standard, as President Trump has rightly insisted on. We are proud to do so, and to support our common security agenda.”<sup>64</sup> This statement illustrates how the trope of “fulfilling the 2 percent target for defence spending” builds on existing elements of the Georgian narrative, such as Tbilisi’s contributions to US-led international operations, the shared sacrifices these involve, and the numerically disproportionate involvement of Georgian troops.

Washington for its part has rapidly expanded the language on Georgia’s security engagement and on cooperation under the Strategic Partnership.<sup>65</sup>

## Further Intensification and Strategic Realignment

While it would be an oversimplification to attribute the development of American-Georgian security and defence cooperation directly to the expansion of the Georgian narrative, the process does illustrate how the relationship has continued to deepen. The performative construction of Georgia as Washington’s dependable security partner described above is, however, just one aspect of the evolution of the cooperation. The central elements are in particular the well-established personal networks, the shared experience of fighting in Afghanistan and a traditionally pro-Georgian attitude in the Pentagon, especially under a Republican administration.<sup>66</sup>

From the Georgian perspective the purchase of Javelin anti-tank-missiles, which finally went through under Trump, represented a significant step towards deeper cooperation. Tbilisi had requested the sale under Obama but Washington declined to approve it, having suspended arms sales after the August War.<sup>67</sup> The deal Trump approved was accompanied by a fundamental turn in security and defence cooperation. Earlier US military support had concentrated above all on training Georgian troops for international deployments, counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism; interoperability with NATO standards; and reform of the defence sector. Now support is explicitly also to be directed to territorial defence capabilities. The Georgian Defense Readiness Program (GDRP) in-

<sup>62</sup> According to interviewees in Washington, Georgia’s support in Afghanistan was appreciated, but under President Obama there were also questions concerning what Georgia might expect in return.

<sup>63</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Statements to the Press with Georgian Prime Minister Mamuka Bakhtadze as Part of the U.S.-Georgia Strategic Partnership Commission”, press release, Washington, D.C., 11 June 2019, <https://www.state.gov/statements-to-the-press-with-georgian-prime-minister-mamuka-bakhtadze-as-part-of-the-u-s-georgia-strategic-partnership-commission/> (accessed 13 August 2020).

<sup>64</sup> Government of Georgia, “Remarks by Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili at the USIP Second Annual U.S.-Georgia Strategic Partnership Conference”, 23 May 2018, [http://gov.ge/index.php?lang\\_id=ENG&sec\\_id=497&info\\_id=65821](http://gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=497&info_id=65821) (accessed 14 August 2020).

<sup>65</sup> For an example see U.S. Department of Defense, “Remarks at Bilateral Meeting with Georgian Minister of Defense Izoria: Remarks as Delivered by Secretary of Defense James Mattis”, Washington, D.C., 13 November 2017, <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Speeches/Speech/Article/1370696/remarks-a%20meeting-with-georgian-minister-of-defense-izoria/> (accessed 12 August 2020).

<sup>66</sup> Cooley and Nexon, “Interpersonal Networks and International Security” (see note 21).

<sup>67</sup> Michael Cecire, “U.S.-Georgia Defense Talks Leave Tbilisi Smiling”, *World Politics Review*, 27 February 2012; Welt, *How Strategic Is the US-Georgia Strategic Partnership?* (see note 34), 7–9; Michael Cecire, “The Rewards and Risks of the U.S. Providing Georgia with Advanced Anti-Tank Arms”, *World Politics Review*, 12 January 2018.



## Georgia and NATO: The Story Since 2008

The United States has been a driving force behind the deepening of cooperation between Georgia and NATO in recent years. Under Trump various high-ranking government representatives have underlined the option of Georgia joining NATO, including Vice President Mike Pence during his state visit in summer 2017. But given that it still lacks a Membership Action Plan and a concrete accession date, Georgia will continue to have to exercise “strategic patience”.<sup>a</sup>

The 2014 NATO summit in Cardiff, which took place against the backdrop of the conflict in and around Ukraine and Russia’s annexation of Crimea, represented an important milestone in NATO-Georgia relations, although below the threshold of an MAP. What Georgia did achieve at the summit was recognition as an Enhanced Opportunities Partner, a status enjoyed otherwise only by Sweden, Finland, Australia, Jordan, and since June 2020 also Ukraine. It grants these countries options for deeper cooperation with NATO. The Substantial NATO-Georgia Package (SNGP) was also approved in Cardiff. Initially it contained strategic, tactical and operational measures in thirteen areas designed to strengthen Georgia’s defence capabilities and interoperability with NATO. One aspect of the SNGP was the establishment of two new institutions in Georgia, the Joint Training and Evaluation Centre (JTEC) and the Defence Institution Building School. The SNGP also provides for support in fields like cyber-defence,

strategic planning and strategic communications.<sup>b</sup> The first NATO-Georgia exercise under the SNGP was held in 2016, the second in March 2019. The SNGP is being implemented successively. In October 2019 the NATO member states and Georgia agreed a comprehensive update. At its Foreign Ministerial on 2 December 2020, NATO approved an SNGP Refresh, adding new components and expanding existing ones.

**a** The White House, “Remarks by the Vice President and Georgian Prime Minister in a Joint Press Conference”, press release, Washington, D.C., 1 August 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-vice-president-georgian-prime-minister-joint-press-conference/> (accessed 12 August 2020).

**b** North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “Substantial NATO-Georgia Package (SNGP): Factsheet”, 13 August 2020, [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf\\_2016\\_02/2016\\_0303\\_160209-factsheet-sngp-full-eng.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2016_02/2016_0303_160209-factsheet-sngp-full-eng.pdf). Sceptics note that the SNGP lacks the necessary NATO resources, and that this undermines its credibility. Tracey German, “NATO and the Enlargement Debate: Enhancing Euro-Atlantic Security or Inciting Confrontation?” *International Affairs* 93, no. 2 (2017): 291–308 (302).

cludes such a priority,<sup>68</sup> under which Georgian forces have been trained for an invasion scenario since May 2018. The groundwork for the programme had been laid in 2016, when Obama was still president. It reflects the Obama administration’s new perspective on Russia and the Caucasus in his second term, in light of events in and around Ukraine. In the United States Russia now became widely regarded as the greatest strategic challenge again.<sup>69</sup> The basis for this intensification of cooperation between Georgia and the United States was a Memorandum on Deepening the Defense and Security Partnership, signed by then Georgian Prime Minister Kvirikashvili and then US Secretary of State Kerry. But it was during the Trump administration that this form of cooperation really

gained momentum.<sup>70</sup> Intelligence sharing between Tbilisi and Washington also expanded under Trump, on the basis of the U.S.-Georgia General Security of Information Agreement signed in 2017, which was also designed to strengthen counter-terrorism cooperation.<sup>71</sup> The two regular US-led military exercises in Georgia — Agile Spirit (since 2011) and Noble Partner (since 2015) — bring in other NATO and non-NATO partners and have also evolved.

**68** Robert E. Hamilton, *August 2008 and Everything After: A Ten-Year Retrospective on the Russia-Georgia War*, Black Sea Strategy Papers (Philadelphia: Foreign Policy Research Institute [FPRI], October 2018), 13; Welt, *How Strategic Is the US-Georgia Strategic Partnership?* (see note 34), 16–18. As Dzebisashvili notes, until then training and education had been uppermost, both in the conceptualisation and in the funding; Dzebisashvili, *Transforming Defence* (see note 18), 259.

**69** Hamilton, *August 2008 and Everything After* (see note 68), 25, 31; Toal, *Near Abroad* (see note 4), 275.

**70** Kucera, “Georgia: Trump Administration Boosting Military Aid” (see note 51); Joshua Kucera, “U.S. Shifting Military Aid to Georgia to Help It Fight at Home”, *Eurasianet*, 7 July 2016, <https://eurasianet.org/us-shifting-military-aid-georgia-help-it-fight-home> (accessed 1 October 2020); Gegeshidze, *Contemporary Georgian-American Relations* (see note 6), 16. The GDRP comprises two components, GDRP-Training and GDRP-Institutional.

**71** “United States, Georgia Sign General Security of Information Agreement”, *Civil.ge* (online), 9 May 2017, <https://civil.ge/archives/126384> (accessed 12 August 2020).

## For Tbilisi defence and security cooperation underlines the close partnership with the United States and Georgia's place in "the West".

Intensifying cooperation appears to offer added value for both sides. For the Georgians defence and security cooperation in particular underlines their close partnership with the United States and their place in "the West". Alongside the practical aspect of enhancing (defence) capacities, "More USA in Georgia" therefore also has symbolic meaning – similar to Tbilisi's "More EU in Georgia".<sup>72</sup> For Washington, and especially the Pentagon, closer cooperation represents a contribution to containing Russia's geopolitical ambitions. It also permits Washington to signal continuing US influence at comparably little cost. Helping partner nations to expand their own capacities also serves the credo of burden-sharing. As one interviewed US official put it, the point is to make Georgia a country the United States can train with, rather than a country it trains.<sup>73</sup>

Closer bilateral cooperation in the area of security and defence is linked to and broadly embedded in the cooperation between Georgia and NATO, which has also expanded in recent years. But it does not automatically bring Georgia any closer to NATO membership, nor will it necessarily even lead to a Membership Action Plan. Even if the Charter on Strategic Partnership states that the "program of enhanced security cooperation [is] intended to increase Georgian capabilities and to strengthen Georgia's candidacy for NATO membership", joining NATO is not currently on the

agenda.<sup>74</sup> Of this both sides are aware. Instead, enhanced bilateral security cooperation can be seen until further notice as an alternative to NATO membership.<sup>75</sup> In the case of territorial defence, for example, bilateral US-Georgia cooperation extends considerably further than the multilateral cooperation between NATO and Georgia.<sup>76</sup>

## Two Faces of Security Policy

The security cooperation and the orientation on Georgia's territorial defence of recent years both reflect and amplify a specific one-sidedness in Washington's security engagement in the region. The United States still participates in the Geneva International Discussions initiated after the August War to enable regular exchange between representatives of Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russia is also involved. Confidence-building and humanitarian measures in this context do figure in the Strategic Partnership, under people-to-people and cultural exchanges,<sup>77</sup> but in the core area of security and defence the conflicts and breakaway regions are discussed above all in the context of Russian transgressions. The growing emphasis on territorial defence makes it even harder for Washington to compartmentalise its engagement in the Geneva International Discussions from the bilateral relationship.

The Ukraine crisis in particular led to a shift in US terminology: Previously the more neutral "protracted conflicts" and the more partial "occupied territories" were both in use. Now the latter term appears to have become established. This is certainly not the first or

<sup>72</sup> See also Ministry of Defence of Georgia, *National Security Concept of Georgia* (Tbilisi, 2018), <https://mod.gov.ge/uploads/2018/pdf/NSC-ENG.pdf> (accessed 13 August 2020); idem, *National Military Strategy* (Tbilisi, 2014), <https://mod.gov.ge/uploads/2018/pdf/NMS-ENG.pdf> (accessed 14 August 2020).

<sup>73</sup> Tim Kreuttner et al., "A Joint and Operational Approach for Security Assistance to Georgia and Ukraine", *Military Review*, March – April 2018, 118 – 28. See also U.S. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge* (Washington, D.C.) <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf> (accessed 12 August 2020); White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C., December 2017), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf> (accessed 12 August 2020).

<sup>74</sup> U.S. Department of State, United States-Georgia Charter (see note 35).

<sup>75</sup> Vladimir Socor, "Georgia Plans Its 'To Do' Agenda for NATO", *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 15, no. 120 (9 August 2018), <https://jamestown.org/program/georgia-plans-its-to-do-agenda-for-nato> (accessed 14 August 2020).

<sup>76</sup> Vladimir Socor, "The United States Does the Heavy Lifting for NATO in Georgia", *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 15, no. 119 (8 August 2018) 119, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-united-states-does-the-heavy-lifting-for-nato-in-georgia/> (accessed 13 August 2020).

<sup>77</sup> See for example U.S. Department of State, "Joint Statement of the 2017 U.S.-Georgia Strategic Partnership Commission Working Group on People-to-People and Cultural Exchanges", press release, Washington, D.C., 22 December 2017, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-of-the-2017-u-s-georgia-strategic-partnership-commission-working-group-on-people-to-people-and-cultural-exchanges/> (accessed 14 August 2020).

only instance where the United States has abandoned the position of “honest broker”. Western pronouncements of support for Georgia’s territorial integrity and sovereignty, as it was already framed in Saakashvili’s time, were hardly compatible with the role of a neutral mediator.<sup>78</sup> In the early years of the Strategic Partnership American experts on Georgia – Lincoln Mitchell and Alexander Cooley and their colleagues Samuel Charap and Cory Welt – recommended that Washington should develop its own strategy towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia, independent of Tbilisi’s policy towards its breakaway regions.<sup>79</sup> Ten years later there is virtually no sign of this. Instead decisions of recent years demonstrate that Washington’s and Tbilisi’s positions converge, especially where Abkhazia and South Ossetia are concerned.<sup>80</sup>

### Strategic Partnership as Washington’s Gateway to Eurasia

Alongside security and defence, Georgia is increasingly seeking to strengthen economic and trade cooperation in the Strategic Partnership. To this end Tbilisi is promoting the idea of an economic corridor between Asia and Europe, in which it sees Georgia playing a key role. In this guise, the idea that Georgia could serve as an economic hub connecting European and Asian markets has thus found its way into the Strategic Partnership. Tbilisi is seeking to adapt the Partnership’s agenda accordingly by upgrading the economic dimension. The concept of an economic hub is by no means restricted to the bilateral American-Georgian cooperation in the Strategic Partnership, nor are its origins to be found there.<sup>81</sup> Instead, official

Georgian pronouncements demonstrate that Tbilisi is now pushing this policy in the bilateral forum while it has in fact been in circulation for some years. Statements by then Prime Minister Mamuka Bakhtadze at the June 2019 meeting of the Strategic Partnership Commission illustrate this: “Georgia provides a unique gateway where American companies can conveniently and quickly reach European and Asian growing markets. We hope that our strategic partnership with the United States will lead us to a unique model of trade cooperation. This will be a next logical step that will open enormous opportunities for the American business interests in our region.” The point of the exercise is to expand cooperation to the economic sphere and attract American investment: “Georgia is open for business and we welcome our American friends to see the opportunities that are existing in Georgia. We want more investment, more trade, and more of the U.S. in Georgia”.<sup>82</sup>

In fact trade with the United States is small in comparison with the European Union; the latter is Georgia’s largest trade partner, connected through an Association Agreement and a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). In 2019 Georgia imported goods worth almost \$680 million from the United States, while Georgian exports to the United States amounted to just over \$130 million. US exports to Georgia account for less than 0.05 percent of total US exports – and imports a miniscule 0.006 percent of the US total. From the Georgian perspective, the United States accounts for 3.5 percent of its exports and 7.1 percent of its imports. Trade diversification is weak: in 2018 iron and steel accounted for more than 90 percent of Georgia’s exports to the United States, while 85 percent of its imports from the United States was machinery and transport equipment.<sup>83</sup> Georgian-American trade thus fits into the general picture of Georgian foreign trade: a trade deficit and exports dominated by unprocessed goods.

Tbilisi believes that one promising way to deepen trade relations would be to concretise the long-discussed idea of a US-Georgia free trade agreement.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Cooley and Mitchell, “No Way to Treat Our Friends” (see note 15), 31; Mitchell and Cooley, *After the August War* (see note 15), 25.

<sup>79</sup> Mitchell and Cooley, *After the August War* (see note 15), 32; Samuel Charap and Cory Welt, *A New Approach to the Russia-Georgia Conflict: The United States Needs a Comprehensive Conflict Policy* (Washington D.C.: Center for American Progress, 18 October 2010), <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/news/2010/10/18/8501/a-new-approach-to-the-russia-georgia-conflict/> (accessed 10 October 2020).

<sup>80</sup> Urban Jakša, *Interpreting Non-Recognition in De Facto States Engagement: The Case of Abkhazia’s Foreign Relations*, Ph.D. diss., University of York, May 2019, 220.

<sup>81</sup> See for example Franziska Smolnik, *Georgia Positions Itself on China’s New Silk Road*, SWP Comment 13/2018 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, March 2018).

<sup>82</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Statements to the Press with Georgian Prime Minister Mamuka Bakhtadze” (see note 63).

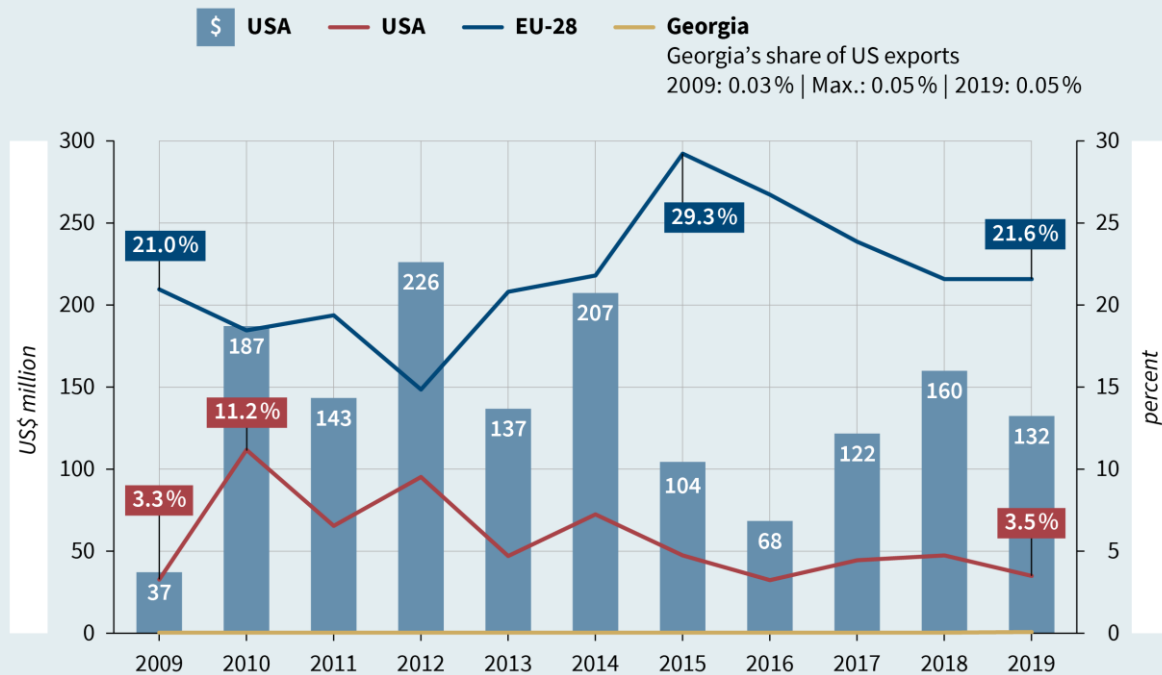
<sup>83</sup> UNCTADSTAT, <http://unctadstat.unctad.org/EN/>.

<sup>84</sup> See for example the *Fox News opinion* piece by the then prime minister: Giorgi Kvirikashvili, “Georgia Prime Minister: US-Georgia Trade Deal Would Create US Jobs, Improve Energy Security”, *Fox News* (online), 23 May 2018, <https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/georgia-prime-minister-us>

Figure 2

**Georgia's exports to the USA and the EU-28**

exports in US\$ million, share in %



Source: IMF, Direction of Trade Statistics (as of 5 October 2020)

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The discussion dates back to the Saakashvili era, and has also been conducted since 2012 in the framework of the U.S.-Georgia High-Level Dialogue on Trade and Investment. Now it surfaces again in the context of the hub concept, which is taking shape in the guise of a web of free trade agreements. Georgia has signed FTAs with China, the European Union and the members of the Commonwealth of Independent States, among others. But the American-Georgian free trade process never seems to move beyond declarations of intent — despite the Georgia Support Act calling for progress and the signing of a memorandum of understanding on cooperation to enhance bilateral trade relations in summer 2019. A breakthrough remains a remote prospect.

Tbilisi employs narrative elements that have been in circulation since the Saakashvili era to underline its desire to deepen economic relations. These include Georgia's low taxes, lean bureaucracy and favourable investment and business environment, as evidenced

by indices such as the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business.<sup>85</sup> However, the fate of the deepwater port at Anaklia — an erstwhile prestige project in the hub context — leaves these arguments sounding less convincing to American ears.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>85</sup> See for example The Embassy of Georgia to the United States, "Georgia-US Strategic Partnership 2018 — All-Time-High", press release, 2 March 2019, <https://georgiaembassyusa.org/2019/03/02/georgia-us-strategic-partnership-2018%E2%80%8A-%E2%80%8Aall-time-high/> (accessed 14 August 2020).

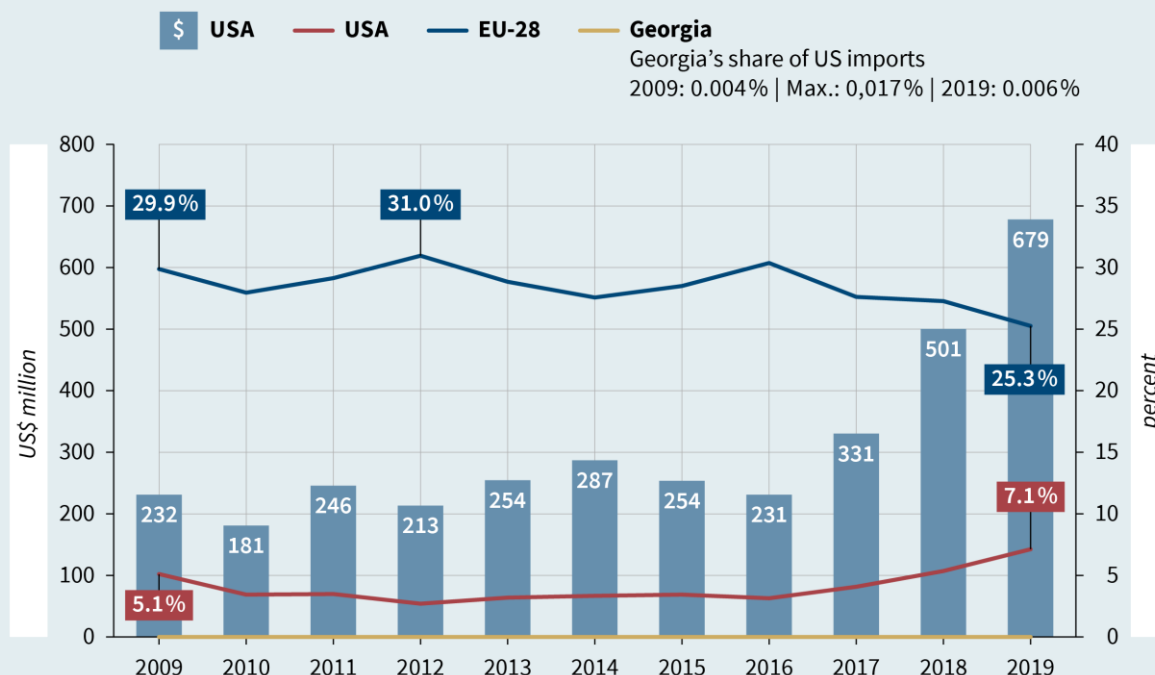
<sup>86</sup> In early 2020 the Georgian government engaged the US lobbying firm Chartwell Strategy Group to strengthen bilateral trade relations and US investment in Georgia. Chartwell had already been working for Tbilisi since 2018 to deepen mutual cooperation. U.S. Department of Justice, [https://efile.fara.gov/ords/f?p=181:200:0::NO:RP,200:P200\\_REG\\_NUMBER,P200\\_DOC\\_TYPE,P200\\_COUNTRY:6518,Exhibit+AB,GEORGIA](https://efile.fara.gov/ords/f?p=181:200:0::NO:RP,200:P200_REG_NUMBER,P200_DOC_TYPE,P200_COUNTRY:6518,Exhibit+AB,GEORGIA) (accessed 14 August 2020).

georgia-trade-deal-would-create-us-jobs-improve-energy-security (accessed 14 August 2020).

Figure 3

**Georgia's imports from the USA and the EU-28**

imports in US\$ million, share in %



Source: IMF, Direction of Trade Statistics (as of 5 October 2020)

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**The Anaklia Affair**

For a long time Tbilisi's plan to create a new deep-water port at Anaklia played a central role in its concept of an international transit and logistics hub. This gigantic infrastructure project was to complement Georgia's existing but less deep Black Sea ports. Tbilisi regarded it as a central component of the proposed east-west corridor connecting Chinese and European markets via Georgia.<sup>87</sup> Construction began in December 2017, with phase one operations originally planned to begin at the end of 2020. The contract for the "project of the century" was awarded in 2016 to a Georgian-American joint venture, the Anaklia Development Consortium (ADC). Tbilisi heralded the participation of a US corporation as evi-

dence of Georgia's Western credentials. Anaklia was also a priority in the Strategic Partnership. It still is – but the connotation has changed dramatically since 2019, after the project became embroiled in scandal and political controversy. Most prominently, the founders of the TBC Bank, the Georgian partner in the ADC,<sup>88</sup> were accused of money-laundering. There was also discord over Tbilisi's refusal to issue credit guarantees for the project. The American Conti Group withdrew from the project in summer 2019, apparently in response to the irregularities. In January 2020 the Georgian government finally terminated its contract with the Anaklia Development Consortium, after the latter failed to acquire sufficient capital for the project by the end of 2019.<sup>89</sup> At least officially, the

<sup>87</sup> An excellent overview of the project and its (lack of) progress can be found in Tekla Aslanishvili and Orit Halpern, "Scenes from a Reclamation", *e-flux Architecture*, New Silk Roads project, 10 February 2020, <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/new-silk-roads/313102/scenes-from-a-reclamation/> (accessed 14 August 2020).

<sup>88</sup> TBC founder Mamuka Khazaradze subsequently founded his own political party, Lelo, which participated in the parliamentary elections in October 2020.

<sup>89</sup> Giorgi Lomsadze, "Georgia Cancels Contract for Black Sea Megaport", *Eurasianet*, 9 January 2020, <https://eurasianet.org/georgia-cancels-contract-for-black-sea-mega-port> (accessed 14 August 2020); "Georgian Government to Announce New Bidding for Anaklia Port after Pulling Contract with Inves-



Georgian government is pressing ahead with the project. But its future is uncertain.

The negotiations and disagreements over the deep-water port were accompanied by interventions from Washington. The project was also mentioned when Secretary of State Mike Pompeo met then Prime Minister Bakhtadze in summer 2019 in Washington. At the press conference Pompeo expressed his “hope that Georgia completes the port project” and warned against “falling prey to Russian or Chinese economic influence”.<sup>90</sup> Anaklia was also mentioned critically in the letters sent to Georgia’s government in winter 2019/20 by leading members of the US Congress.

Anaklia is not the only case where American businesses have become embroiled in controversy with the Georgian government or local competitors, or affected by such disputes.<sup>91</sup> Without heed to the specifics, US actors frequently sweepingly attribute such conflicts to a lack of fair competition or supposedly widespread pro-Russian bias making it hard for US firms to gain a foothold in the Georgian market. In fact one must differentiate. In some cases the criticisms appear to conceal particular interests of private-sector US actors. Where US businesses induce local political representatives to raise their interests on the international stage, these issues become tied to established geopolitical positions — probably in the hope that this would lend more force to their demands.<sup>92</sup> Overall, however, one can conclude: While Tbilisi seeks to sell itself as an economic hub in its imagined geography, Washington prioritises — at least in its rhetoric — fair competition and rule of law.

tor”, *OC Media* (online), 23 January 2020, <https://oc-media.org/georgian-government-to-announce-new-bidding-for-anaklia-port-after-pulling-contract-with-investor/> (accessed 14 August 2020).

<sup>90</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Statements to the Press with Georgian Prime Minister Mamuka Bakhtadze” (see note 63).

<sup>91</sup> Ken Stier, “Georgia: Backsliding on Rule of Law Is Damaging Investment Climate”, *Eurasianet*, 12 July 2020, <https://eurasianet.org/georgia-backsliding-on-rule-of-law-is-damaging-investment-climate> (accessed 20 July 2020).

<sup>92</sup> This appears to have been the case with Frontera Resources. See Sopiko Japaridze, “An Investor Standoff in Georgia Brings Workers, US Congressmen into Conflict”, *openDemocracy* (online), 29 January 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/investor-standoff-georgia-brings-workers-us-congressmen-conflict/> (accessed 14 August 2020).

## Lack of “Strategic Vision”

Georgia’s attempts to develop the Strategic Partnership in its own interest frequently encounter limits in Washington’s lack of a strategic vision for the country and the region. In that sense the “partnership” is in fact only partially “strategic”. American documents and official statements do indicate that US engagement in the region is intended to contain Russian (and increasingly also Chinese) influence, as laid out for example in the US National Defense Strategy. Strategic competition with China and Russia is also mentioned as a priority in the National Defense Authorization Act for 2021, which was adopted by Congress in early December 2020.<sup>93</sup> This orientation is also reflected in (draft) legislation relating to Georgia. As well as the Georgia Support Act, Georgia is mentioned in the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act of 2017, which imposes sanctions on Russia, Iran and North Korea.<sup>94</sup> The John McCain National Defense Authorization Act of 2018 mentions the necessity to strengthen the ability of European partners — explicitly including Georgia — to deter Russian aggression.<sup>95</sup>

### US engagement is not embedded in a longer-term strategy.

US engagement is not, however, embedded in a longer-term strategy. Interviewees in Tbilisi complain that Georgia is currently “not in the picture” in Washington. It might be more accurate to say that Washington simply does not have a comprehensive strategic plan for the region, and has not had one since the end of the Bush administration. Back then vital interests defined US policy towards the South Caucasus, including Caspian energy resources, the US war in Afghanistan, counter-terrorism, and the promotion of democratic institutions and practices. Today by contrast, clear principles are lacking. The situation under

<sup>93</sup> House of Representatives, William M. (Mac) Thornberry *National Defense Authorization Act For Fiscal Year 2021* (Washington, D.C., 2020), <https://www.congress.gov/bills/116th-congress/house-bill/6395/text> (accessed 10 December 2020).

<sup>94</sup> Joseph Larsen, *What Has the United States Done for Georgia Lately?* (Tbilisi: Georgian Institute of Politics, 29 August 2017), <http://gip.ge/united-states-done-georgia-lately/> (accessed 11 March 2020).

<sup>95</sup> Congress of the United States of America, John S. McCain *National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019* (Washington, D.C., 3 January 2018).

Trump, where agencies in Washington were not only inadequately coordinated but in some cases openly mistrustful, only exacerbated the problem. That has naturally been detrimental to policy coherence — not only towards the South Caucasus.

Official statements from Tbilisi in connection with the Strategic Partnership suggest that the Georgian leadership is working actively to put their country back more firmly on America's strategic "radar" by defining their own imagined geography and establishing it in Washington. In this sense, Georgia advertises itself as a constructive factor for Black Sea Security. US naval vessels have stepped up port visits to demonstrate support. Integrating Georgia into NATO's Black Sea Security process is increasingly discussed. The role of the latter is also to be expanded within the framework of the overhauled SNGP.<sup>96</sup> It remains questionable however, how successful Georgia's attempts to position itself strategically in terms of security policy in the context of the Strategic Partnership can be, as long as an American vision for the region is lacking.<sup>97</sup>

**96** See for example Government of Georgia, "US-Georgia Relations Are at All Time High and We Are Very Proud of It", States Prime Minister of Georgia", Tbilisi, 23 April 2019, [http://gov.ge/index.php?lang\\_id=ENG&sec\\_id=526&info\\_id=71302](http://gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=526&info_id=71302) (accessed 14 August 2020); Alexandra Kuimova/Simon T. Wezeman, *Georgia and Black Sea Security*, SIPRI Background Paper (Solna: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute [SIPRI], December 2018), 6, [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2018-12/bp\\_1812\\_black\\_sea\\_georgia\\_0.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2018-12/bp_1812_black_sea_georgia_0.pdf) (accessed 14 August 2020); or at the Meeting of NATO Ministers of Foreign Affairs in April 2020: "NATO Ministers of Foreign Affairs Agree on New Measures to Support Georgia and Ukraine in the Context of Black Sea Security", *Georgian Journal* (online), 2 April 2020, <https://www.georgianjournal.ge/politics/36473-nato-ministers-of-foreign-affairs-agree-on-new-measures-to-support-georgia-and-ukraine-in-the-context-of-black-sea-security.html> (accessed 14 August 2020). While the SNGP includes a naval component, observers point out that NATO itself does not (yet) have a clear strategy for the Black Sea — in part because NATO members differ in their threat assessments for the region. Ben Hodges, Janusz Bugajski, Ray Wojcik and Carsten Schmiedl, *One Flank, One Threat, One Presence: A Strategy for NATO's Eastern Flank* (Washington D.C.: Center for European Policy Analysis, May 2020); Stephen J. Flanagan et al., *Russia, NATO, and Black Sea Security* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2020).

**97** There are also impediments on the Georgian side. The country's Black Sea coast is comparatively short and it no longer possesses a navy, which was merged with the coast-guard under the Ministry of the Interior in 2008. See also

As well as the Black Sea, US engagement in Georgia potentially ties in with strategically significant neighbouring countries and regions such as Iran, the Middle East and Turkey. One example was the visit to the South Caucasus by then National Security Adviser John Bolton in October 2018, seeking support for US sanctions against Iran. But such sporadic initiatives are a far cry from a comprehensive US regional strategy that would embed Georgia in more multi-dimensional strategic thinking and on which Georgia could build its own policies.<sup>98</sup>

Tbilisi conceives the Black Sea not only in strategic security terms but also as an economic factor, as one leg of a trade corridor linking Asia and Europe. Here Georgia's function is a geographical crossroads — and anything but peripheral. Tbilisi's efforts, though, to communicate the idea of Georgia as a central actor on an east-west trade axis evaporate in Washington's strategic vacuum. Statements by US Secretary of State Pompeo in June 2019 demonstrate that the United States also critically registers Russia's — and also China's — economic influence in the region.<sup>99</sup> But in the economic sphere, too, the United States lacks a strategic concept for whether and how to respond to Chinese and Russian influence in Georgia and the region. With its EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy, the European Union has published a concept that can be interpreted as a European alternative to the Eurasian elements of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The New Silk Road Initiative launched in 2011 by then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, appears to exist only on paper; it was geographically more limited than the BRI anyway, and largely focussed on Afghanistan.<sup>100</sup> The US-

Deborah Sanders, *Maritime Power in the Black Sea* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 115ff.

**98** See also Iulia-Sabina Joja, *US Engagement in the Black Sea and Middle East: What More Can Be Done?* (Washington, D.C.: Middle East Institute, 8 April 2020), <https://www.mei.edu/publications/us-engagement-black-sea-and-middle-east-what-more-can-be-done> (accessed 14 August 2020). The example of Iran also indicates how such linkage could face Tbilisi with uncomfortable choices.

**99** This was not always the case in relation to China: Washington initially viewed Beijing's growing Eurasian engagement positively as a possible diversification option vis-à-vis Russia.

**100** The initiative focussed above all on Central Asia. The South Caucasus, which has been separate from Central Asia in the structures of the US Department of State since 2005, was not explicitly mentioned. Marlene Laruelle, "The US Silk Road: Geopolitical Imaginary or the Repackaging of Strategic

supported Three Seas Initiative connects countries from the Baltic via the Black Sea to the Adriatic with a focus on expanding transport, energy and digital infrastructures.<sup>101</sup> But even if Georgia is occasionally mentioned in this context, the initiative is currently restricted to EU member states.

## Partnership in the Pandemic

Surprisingly, in view of the lack of strategic vision in relation to the region and the Trump administration's poor showing in the fight against Covid-19, Washington's reputation in Georgia has grown in the course of the pandemic. The main factor behind this is the Richard G. Lugar Center for Public Health Research in Tbilisi, which opened 2011 with US funding and expertise and is today run by Georgia.<sup>102</sup>

The "Lugar Lab" and other regional laboratories in the country owe their existence to the U.S. Cooperative Threat Reduction Program, which was established to assist post-Soviet nations in combatting dangerous pathogens, improving laboratory infrastructure and establishing biosecurity capacities.<sup>103</sup> The Center bears the name of the late Republican Senator Richard Lugar, who promoted the initiative together with his Democrat colleague Sam Nunn. The Lugar Lab has provided testing capacity for SARS-CoV2 and has played an extraordinarily important role nationally. Its head, Paata Imnadze, is one of the four prominent experts who have guided the country's pandemic response, which until autumn 2020 – when the situation severely deteriorated – was comparably successful. In a representative survey by the US National Democratic Institute published in June 2020, 66 percent of respondents said they believed the Lugar Lab was preventing the spread of Covid-19. As con-

cerns external support, 46 percent said the United States was supporting Georgia in the fight against the virus – while the EU was seen as supportive by 45 percent, China by 32 percent. In a survey published by the International Republican Institute (IRI) in August 2020, 47 percent said the United States was the most important external supporter; the corresponding figure for China was just 6 percent.<sup>104</sup>

Soon after it opened the Lugar Lab was subject to attacks, above all by pro-Russian actors in Georgia and from Russia itself. It was alleged that its research activities were a danger to the public, and the facility was even said to be developing biological weapons.<sup>105</sup> When the Covid-19 pandemic hit in spring 2020, the attacks sharpened. Now Chinese channels joined the Russian disinformation campaign, claiming that the Lugar Lab and other facilities in post-Soviet countries were part of an American network for developing and deploying biological weapons, and that they were implicated in the current crisis. In fact the laboratory is an example of cooperation with the United States directly benefitting large parts of the population.<sup>106</sup>

Health cooperation between Washington and Tbilisi is also part of the Strategic Partnership, even if it attracts a great deal less attention than the other dimensions discussed above. The Joint Statement of the 2017 U.S.-Georgia Strategic Partnership Commission Working Group on People-to-People and Cultural Exchanges, for example mentions "continuing cooperation with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control to

Interests?" *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 56, no. 4 (2015): 360–75.

**101** Congressional Research Service, *The Three Seas Initiative*, In Focus, 12 May 2020, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IF11547.pdf> (accessed 14 August 2020). In spring 2020 US Secretary of State Pompeo proposed funding of up to \$1 billion for projects under the initiative.

**102** The Center also still houses the U.S. Army Medical Research Directorate-Georgia, an outpost of the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research.

**103** James C. Bartholomew et al., "Building Infectious Disease Research Programs to Promote Security and Enhance Collaborations with Countries of the Former Soviet Union", *Frontiers in Public Health* 3, no. 271 (2015).

**104** National Democratic Institute (NDI), *Public Attitudes in Georgia: Results of June 2020 Survey* (Washington, D.C., June 2020), [https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia%20Poll%20Results\\_June\\_2020\\_Final%20Version\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia%20Poll%20Results_June_2020_Final%20Version_ENG.pdf) (accessed 14 August 2020). IRI, *Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Georgia. June–July 2020* (Washington, D.C., 12 August 2020), 10, [https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/iri\\_poll\\_presentation-georgia\\_june\\_2020\\_general-aug\\_4\\_corrections\\_1.pdf](https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/iri_poll_presentation-georgia_june_2020_general-aug_4_corrections_1.pdf) (accessed 6 September 2020).

**105** Zaal Anjaparidze, "Russia Dusts Off Conspiracy Theories about Georgia's Lugar Center Laboratory in Midst of COVID-19 Crisis", *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 17, no. 62 (5 May 2020), <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-dusts-off-conspiracy-theories-about-georgias-lugar-center-laboratory-in-midst-of-covid-19-crisis/>; "Foreign Experts: Lugar Lab Is Transparent in Its Activities", *Civil.ge* (online), 18 November 2018, <https://civil.ge/archives/266268> (accessed 1 October 2020).

**106** Paul Stronski, "Ex-Soviet Bioweapons Labs Are Fighting COVID-19: Moscow Doesn't Like It", *Foreign Policy* (online), 25 June 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/06/25/soviet-bioweapons-labs-georgia-armenia-kazakhstan-coronavirus-russia-disinformation/> (accessed 14 August 2020).



increase treatment levels and reduce levels of infection”.<sup>107</sup> The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in particular works to expand and improve capacities in the Georgian health system.<sup>108</sup>

The beginning of the Covid-19 crisis coincided with Kelly Degnan taking office as US ambassador at the end of January 2020, after the post had been vacant for almost two years. This is also likely to reinforce Washington’s profile in Georgia. Degnan is an experienced career diplomat, particularly well versed in security policy, and likely to enhance the visibility of Washington’s position and its influence on the ground. Since her appointment Degnan has also demonstrated her willingness to comment on political developments in Georgia, indicating that she is keeping an eye on Georgian reforms.

**107** U.S. Department of State, “Joint Statement of the 2017 U.S.-Georgia Strategic Partnership Commission Working Group on People-to-People and Cultural Exchanges” (see note 77).

**108** Irakli Sirbiladze, “How the Partnership with the West Shaped Georgia’s COVID-19 Response”, *New Eastern Europe*, 22 April 2020, <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2020/04/22/how-the-partnership-with-the-west-shaped-georgias-covid-19-response/> (accessed 14 August 2020).

# Conclusion: Inertia and a Need for New Ideas

For more than ten years now the Strategic Partnership has shaped relations between the United States and Georgia. It is certainly not a static affair. Both sides have attempted to advance their priorities for and expectations of the bilateral relationship. These mutual expectations, ascribed functions, and associated rights and obligations intersect but are not entirely congruent.

For the United States the Strategic Partnership is more than just a “cheap” option to signal ongoing solidarity and express American leadership. From the beginning, Washington has also treated it as an instrument for actively supporting political developments within Georgia, with an eye to pursuing its own priorities and further consolidating values like democracy and rule of law. Although — as the regular joint statements confirm — the Strategic Partnership is already based on shared values, it also offers Washington leverage to advance domestic reforms in Georgia (or at least the possibility of monitoring).<sup>109</sup> Examples include the critical public statements directed towards Tbilisi in winter 2019/2020 by senior members of US Congress. The latter at the same time underlines Georgia’s role in Washington as a “showcase of democracy”.

The aspect of shared values is important from the Georgian perspective as well and forms a central thread of the bilateral “conversation”. But it also constantly exposes the ongoing distance and asymmetry between the two partners. Tbilisi may point to democratic achievements to underline Georgia’s importance for the United States — and the EU — and

anchor it in “the West”. But as well as successes of democratisation, Washington — and Brussels — register discrepancies between rhetoric and practice. These tend to accentuate and reproduce rather than overcome Georgia’s intermediate geopolitical status, its liminality, and the asymmetry of the relationships.<sup>110</sup>

Like its predecessors, the Georgian Dream government therefore works actively to boost Georgia’s strategic significance for and partnership with Washington. To that end it prioritises security and defence (“Black Sea Security”) and recently also economic and trade cooperation (“Georgia as hub”). Whether or not Washington remains, as asserted during the Saakashvili/Bush era, the “second arena of Georgian politics”,<sup>111</sup> close relations remain central for Tbilisi. They also represent an important “currency” in domestic (party-) political competition. This was observed in the run-up to the October 2020 parliamentary elections. Unlike its predecessors, the current government faces an additional challenge in connection with the construction of relevance: Since the end of the Bush administration the American side has had no clear strategic regional policy to which Tbilisi could relate. Instead Washington’s policy towards Georgia and the region under Donald Trump has been characterised above all

<sup>109</sup> In that respect the US-Georgian Strategic Partnership fits into the predominant pattern of Washington’s partnerships. Zhongqi Pan and Anna Michalski, “Contending Logics of Strategic Partnership in International Politics”, *Asia Europe Journal*, no. 17 (2019): 265–80 (274); Sean Kay, “What Is a Strategic Partnership?” *Problems of Post-Communism* 47, no. 3 (2000): 15–24 (18).

<sup>110</sup> Nutsa Batiashvili, *The Bivocal Nation: Memory and Identity on the Edge of Empire* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), xi; Shota Kakabadze, “The East in the West: South Caucasus between Russia and the European Union”, *Polity* 52, no. 2 (2020): 273–87; Bahar Rumelili, “Liminal Identities and Processes of Domestication and Subversion in International Relations”, *Review of International Studies* 38, no. 2 (2012): 495–508 (502f.). While liminality per se can be understood as a productive space of opportunity and new possibilities, enduring liminality tends to erode these positive attributes. Maria Mäklsoo, “The Challenge of Liminality for International Relations Theory”, *Review of International Studies* 38, no. 2 (2012): 481–94 (489).

<sup>111</sup> De Waal, *Mrs. Clinton Goes to Georgia* (see note 25).

by inertia. While this helped to compensate internal tensions in Washington and the lack of a coordinated multi-agency strategy — and as such to uphold US influence — it provided little in the way of new input for the relationship. Security and defence represents an exception, where military cooperation has been adjusted to see the United States explicitly supporting Georgia's territorial defence. This demonstrates that innovations in the bilateral cooperation are possible, where an institutional interest exists.

It is not only to Tbilisi's disadvantage, however, if Washington's Georgia policy has been less strategic and the region has attracted rather little attention, especially compared to the Bush administration. It is conceivable for example that the growing tensions between the United States and China will also rub off on Washington's perspective on Georgia and the South Caucasus. That would inevitably have a bearing on Tbilisi's project to establish Georgia as a logistics hub on an east-west axis connecting China and Europe.

As yet, however, Washington has no regional response to China's Belt and Road Initiative. The Russian factor, though, already harbours possible imponderables or even disruptive potential for Georgian-American relations — in particular should the geopoliticisation of American foreign policy persist. Anti-Russian sentiment in the US Congress, upon which Georgia has long relied to nurture relationships with US politicians, is not unequivocally positive for Georgian Dream. Party leader Bidzina Ivanishvili in particular is viewed with mistrust in Congress, among other things on account of his former business dealings in Russia.<sup>112</sup>

What implications does the American-Georgian relationship have for German and EU policy towards Georgia? The United States welcomes Georgia moving closer to the European Union. This also fits with the US line of expecting greater burden-sharing from European partners. Despite sharing an Association Agreement and a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) with Georgia, the EU receives barely a mention in the joint statements on the Stra-

tegic Partnership.<sup>113</sup> At the practical level, however, the EU-Georgian Association Agreement is certainly taken into account, for example in US-funded development projects. There is also at least situational cooperation on the ground, as also reflected in joint statements by the respective embassies in Tbilisi in response to political developments.

For all the Trumpian "America First" rhetoric, the United States remains the decisive partner from the Georgian perspective where security and defence cooperation is concerned. This remains the case despite a degree of security-related disillusionment following the August War and the opinion in certain quarters that authorisation of Tbilisi's widely discussed Javelin anti-tank-missile purchase was driven principally by Washington's Ukraine policy. The more recent cooperation to support Georgian territorial defence underlines Washington's unchallenged role in this area. By serving one of Tbilisi's principal concerns, it in a way relieves the European Union, whose security profile in the region is weak, or in the case of the EU Monitoring Mission orientated on conflict management and resolution.<sup>114</sup>

As far as the economic dimension is concerned, however, the EU is streets ahead. The possibility of a free trade agreement between Tbilisi and Washington at some future point would do nothing to change that. In a sense, one could speak of a *de facto* division of labour between Washington and Brussels, admittedly without this ever having been explicitly agreed. But Brussels cannot rely on Washington continuing the arrangement in its current form, especially as Washington is currently expecting more of the EU in its own neighbourhood. And one decisive component is lacking: Although the United States and the EU each possess formats for bilateral cooperation — with the Strategic Partnership and the Association Agreement respectively — neither has a strategic concept for Georgia. For the foreseeable future Georgia will be joining neither NATO nor the EU. That places limits on cooperation. As such, then, the Strategic Partnership with the United States and association with the EU both perpetuate Georgia's liminal status, its in-betweenness. The current political leadership in Tbilisi is holding its Euro-Atlantic course; and public

**112** Some members of Congress do also tend to employ a simplistic pro-Russian/anti-Russian dichotomy to advance the particular interests of private-sector actors they represent, squeezing such interests into such a foreign policy framework to grant them geopolitical weight.

**113** The EU-Georgia Association Agreement was signed in 2014 and came into force in 2016.

**114** While the United States remains Georgia's central security partner, Tbilisi also notes the discord in the transatlantic relationship and the discussion about the future of NATO.

support for Euro-Atlantic integration remain comparatively strong, despite fluctuations and certain objections.<sup>115</sup> Given the partly diverging expectations of the respective mutual relationships, however, the Western partners cannot be certain that this will remain so in the absence of a strategic vision for Georgia and the region. The question of new inputs and strategic objectives therefore applies not only to American-Georgian relations. It also needs to be given earnest consideration in Brussels.

## Abbreviations

ADC	Anaklia Development Consortium
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CRS	Congressional Research Service
DCFTA	Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area
DIIS	Danish Institute for International Studies (Copenhagen)
EU	European Union
GDRP	Georgian Defense Readiness Program
GTEP	Georgia Train and Equip Program
ID	Intensified Dialogue
IPAP	Individual Partnership Action Plan
IRI	International Republican Institute (Washington, D.C.)
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
JTEC	Joint Training and Evaluation Centre
KFOR	NATO Kosovo Force
MAP	Membership Action Plan
NDI	National Democratic Institute (Washington, D.C.)
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
SNGP	Substantial NATO-Georgia Package
UNM	United National Movement (Ertiani Nationaluri Modsraboba)
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

**115** In a representative survey published by NDI in June 2020 76 percent of respondents said they supported joining the EU, and 69 percent supported joining NATO. In the IRI survey published in August 2020 87 percent supported joining the EU (64 percent fully, 23 percent somewhat), while 78 percent supported joining NATO (56 percent fully, 22 percent somewhat). NDI, *Public Attitudes in Georgia* (see note 104); IRI, *Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Georgia* (see note 104), 58, 62; Batiashvili, *Bivocal Nation* (see note 110), 16ff.

